Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
11
Magical Girl
Raising Project
QUEENS

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PUK PUCK
Can make friends with anyone.

MANA
Uses spells and ceremonies to perform various magics.

DARK CUTIE
Can manipulate shadows and silhouettes as if they're real.

GLASSIANNE
Can see all sorts of places with her magical glasses.

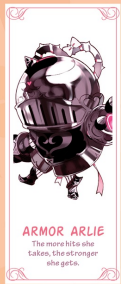
SNOW WHITE
Can hear the thoughts of those in need.

ULURU
Is very good at lying.

PFLE
Uses a magical wheelchair to race at intense speeds.

PRINCESS DELUGE
Fights enemies using the power of ice.

BLUEBELL CANDY
Makes magical candies that can alter your feelings.

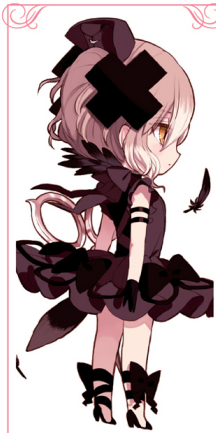

ARMOR ARLIE
The more hits she takes, the stronger she gets.

CQ ANGEL HAMUEL

Can speak directly into people's heads.

SHUFFLIN II

Her powers change depending on various suits and numbers.



SHADOW GALE

Can power up machines by modifying them.

LETHE

Confounds her opponents' sense of distance.

11

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New York

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Asari Endou

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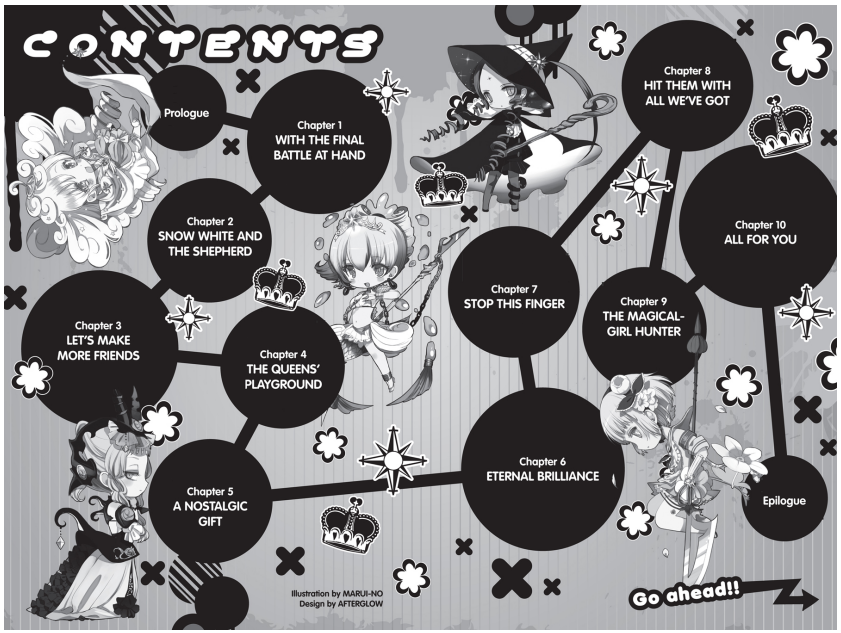
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Go ahead!!

PROLOGUE

There was no end in sight to the flurry of activity as the magical girls under Puk Puck's command all put their noses to the grindstone. One group was in the dojo, having sparring match after sparring match; another group was in the studio for choral practice; another was carrying a bunch of large tires; and yet another was taking apart television sets. All the while, encouraging cries of, "If now isn't the time to give it our all, then when is?!" could be heard throughout.

Magical girls clad in brilliant costumes of every color were being forced into tedious, unappealing tasks, but not a single one was whining or complaining about it—and not only were they avoiding such talk among themselves, but privately, too. In fact, they probably didn't think to complain. They were able to put everything they had into this work for the sake of their great leader, Puk Puck. To these girls, this labor was not a hardship, but a joy.

Some of the girls were carrying boxes from the storehouses.

These boxes were packed with valuable art pieces and rare magic items, but more important than their simple monetary value were the precious memories Puk Puck associated with each object. As the girls loaded the wooden boxes into the large trucks lined up in the front yard, some sighed woefully at the tire tracks drawn over the beautiful white sand or gazed at the starkly emptied storehouses with tears in their eyes, while others sat in the drivers' seats of the trucks and leaned against the steering wheels as they bit their lips.

This estate had been full of so many memories for all of them: when they'd gotten into a fight over a magical-girl anime and then made up the next day; when one girl set a record in combat training and everyone congratulated her; that time they'd all huddled around a campfire together in the garden, gazing up at the world tree as they stuffed their cheeks with barbecued meat on skewers;

that time one girl had been so entranced by how adorable Lady Puk Puck was that she became flustered and awkward when Lady Puk spoke to her. The dire situation unfolding at the estate was attempting to destroy those memories. The girls couldn't help feeling emotional.

And yet they soldiered on, taking care not to linger on such emotions. They had their comrades encouraging them, their bosses patting their backs, or the image of Puk Puck rising in their minds. No matter how much it hurt right now, once the Puk Faction had accomplished its goal, theirs would be a blessed future, and this would all settle down into stories of the struggles of days gone by. *"It was tough back then, huh?"* they'd say as they laughed to each other, proudly telling the younger ones their tales of woe.

What they needed right now was not old art pieces or magical items for noncombat use. It was magical gems—gemstones filled with magic power that mages used for various ceremonies. In order to acquire as many as possible, the girls were exchanging their valuables, fully aware that they wouldn't get their money's worth. The bigger and more dazzling the gem, the more magic power could be stored in it, so the better the gem, the fewer there were in circulation. Puk Puck's girls went to merchants, researchers, collectors, and the nouveau riche to negotiate for their gems, then hired mercenaries and stocked up on TV screens. Mercenary magical girls were not worthy of serving someone as noble as Puk Puck, but one couldn't be picky at a time like this—and besides, they'd hired mercenaries in the past who had become smitten with Puk Puck and come to live in the estate. Even if these types had initially been drawn purely by monetary reward, when they came into contact with Puk Puck's greatness and her charm, they could change. People changed once they got to know Puk Puck. Magical girls changed. The world changed. These girls were working as hard as they could for the sake of a new world where Puk Puck would reign supreme.

But not all the magical girls were like this.

Uluru, who had lost her two younger sisters, was still on standby in her room, as she'd been ordered. She wasn't moving and she wasn't working. She wasn't seeing anyone or showing herself to anyone. She was just sitting there. The other magical girls were kind and sympathetic enough not to blame her for that. Premium Sachiko, who had run away from the estate at such an important

time, had painted a clear picture for them in bringing about one's own demise, but she'd still been dear family to Uluru. Including Sorami, who had lost her life fighting the enemy out on a mission, the trio had often gone out with Puk Puck, so they'd become the subject of jealousy and envy, but now that Uluru was alone, all she gathered was pity.

Puk Puck's estate in W City was right in the middle of a whirlpool of turmoil, the origin of a storm. Various powers were watching the Puk Faction's activities, and this information had made its way up to Puk Puck, the leader of the faction, but the situation was already such that they couldn't be worried about how they appeared in the eyes of others. Puk's goal was close at hand. She had absolutely no time or attention to spare.

Puk Puck herself was working harder than anyone else. But she showed no sign of struggle, and seeing her with the same smile as always invigorated many of the girls, making them think, *If Lady Puk is so earnest about this, then how could I not work even more?*

But it wasn't as if Puk Puck were doing this to heighten the morale of her forces. She was joining in because she had to. The smile was an added bonus.

She'd provided private rooms for all the magical girls she had assembled for the ceremony, starting with Shadow Gale.

"Hold on a bit longer, 'kay, big sis?" said Puk.

"Yes, I'll be waiting a little bit longer," Shadow Gale replied.

"And everyone else, wait a bit longer, too, 'kay?"

Puk Puck could adjust the strength of her magic and how quickly she could befriend each individual target. If she turned up her magic's power too much, then it wasn't much different from brainwashing, and since that caused symptoms like personality changes and intellectual stunting, she normally preferred to take her time becoming friends. If a target got separated from Puk Puck, the effects of her magic would gradually fade, but she liked that, since it gave their friendship a sense of realness. But this was an emergency, so it wasn't the time to be prioritizing her personal taste. She would meet frequently with those she wanted to maintain the friendship effect with, and if it was necessary to befriend a person all in one go, then she had to do it.

"If we go out, let's play together," said Puk.

"Yes, let's play together."

Seeing Shadow Gale looking entranced, repeating her words practically like a chant, Puk Puck nodded several times in satisfaction, patting Shadow Gale's head on the way out before she left. She hated to part with a new friend, but there were lots of other things on her agenda. She showed up in every one of the guest rooms and met with each of the friends in "custody" there. She had to go see them regularly, otherwise their friendship would fade, even with Puk Puck's magic at full force. Friendship was not something that simply forced allegiance one-sidedly; it took work on Puk Puck's part.

The magical nail artist Illunail; Beastwoman Brandia, who had very strong claws; Ann Sardi, who could control people without their realizing; and Verstice, who could give machines hearts—all of them were important friends.

"Hello, Lady Puk."

"You're so cute today."

"Thinking about you puts my heart at ease, Lady Puk."

Puk Puck spoke to each one and cordially petted their heads. Once she was out of the dungeon area, she stripped off her apron dress, and her attendant magical girls immediately adorned her in a toga and arranged her hair without missing a beat. Puk Puck exited the underground of the east wing and passed through the mansion hallways before heading for the west wing.

To get there as quickly as possible, she took a shortcut through a room with sliding doors. When the doors to the next room slid open, there sat Uluru with her shoulders slumped. That reminded Puk Puck that she seemed to recall Uluru's room being around here.

"Cheer up, 'Luru," said Puk.

"Lady Puk, about Snow White—"

Puk Puck restrained the attendant who tried to take Uluru to task for rudely not offering so much as a greeting. Her head drooped sadly as she said, "So the one who got Sacchi was a friend of Snowy's, huh? Puk heard about that, too, but…but listen, there's no point in blaming Snowy Sis for that now, you know?"

"But—"

"Puk will make sure to talk to her, too."

Despite having just managed to bring herself to her feet, Uluru dropped to her knees on the tatami again, hugging her arms to her chest. She moaned like she was in pain, and droplets hit the floor one after another. Uluru was crying.

“’Luru.”

“I…I…”

Two minutes and thirty seconds had passed since Puk Puck had stopped. Right now, she couldn’t spare even one minute and one second.

“…Sorry.” Puk went around Uluru, and her attending magical girls silently followed. Uluru’s sobs behind Puk gradually drew away, muffled by the rustling sound of paper being crushed.

Puk automatically turned back. Cutting through her attendants, she saw Uluru was absentmindedly gazing at a piece of paper she had pulled from her pocket. “’Luru, that’s…”

“This is all Sachiko left behind.”

Puk approached Uluru in large strides and took the paper from her. The name column, the question column with yes/no options—she’d seen this before. There was no mistaking it—this was one of the contracts needed to activate Premium Sachiko’s magic.

“There was one! There was one left!” Puk cried.

“Lady Puk, that’s…”

“This is it! All we need is this! Thanks, ’Luru!”

Uluru was still trying to say something, but Puk’s mind had already flown off somewhere else. With this—with Premium Sachiko’s contract—the odds were way higher the ceremony would succeed.

Puk Puck handed the paper she’d taken from Uluru over to one of her attendants and strode onward through the rooms so fast she was nearly running, but then, after taking five steps, she turned back. “Hey, so even though Sacchi’s gone, she’s helping us. We’re all in this together. You come join us, too, ’Luru.”

Without waiting for Uluru’s response, Puk Puck walked off. She didn’t turn back. No, she didn’t have the time to be turning back. The fulfillment of her two longstanding desires—reviving the Magical Kingdom and being able to make friends with all magical girls forever—was right there in front of her.

CHAPTER 1
WITH THE FINAL BATTLE AT HAND

◇ **CQ Angel Hamuel**

"We've received a notice from the team monitoring Puk Puck's estate."

"And they said?"

"They have reported that sixteen large trucks have been given entrance to the estate, and they've begun to load them with goods from their storehouses."

"Just as I presumed, eh." This voice came from a girl in her late teens, which was older than average for a typical magical girl. It had none of the shrill pitch particular to young girls. It would be no overstatement to say her tone exuded nobility. However, her diction and speech were rather unique.

Word had gotten around to the Osk Faction that the Puk Faction was selling off its artworks and magical items. They'd surely meant to be covert, but they'd messed that up by seeking deals with antique arts merchants who had deep ties with the Osk Faction. Since every detail of these deals was transmitted to Hamuel in real time, she could pinpoint when the Puk Faction would acquire magical gems. In other words, she could follow its every move.

Hamuel was of the opinion that the Three Sages' lack of contact with broader society made them naive about the ways of the world. No matter how malicious they were in their hearts, they believed they would not ever suffer the malice of others. That was how Grim Heart had been, and Puk Puck was cut from the same cloth.

"Tell them to drag out negotiations as much as possible, eh. But not so much that the sellers become fed up with them for wasting their time—enough that even if it vexes them, they think, *If I end this negotiation, then all this time I've spent will have been wasted, and I*

want to avoid that."

"That's a rather complex order to fulfill."

"If you imply there'll be a big deal for them down the line, eh, then they'll work beyond their usual capabilities." Sunk into the sofa, the magical girl drew back her chin. The heart Shufflin II who attended at her side immediately held out a sake cup for her and poured a bright-orange fruit juice into it. The magical girl sipped at it to taste, swishing it around in her mouth before swallowing it.

Everything about that gesture looked so arrogant. Her horn-shaped headdress was edged with lace, her luxurious dress required that the skirts be lifted or dragged in order for her to walk around properly, and those things combined with her attitude gave her a very self-important air. But because she was so over the top, she wound up looking less like an important person and more like a caricature of an important person made to mock one. Add to that the way she emphasized "eh" when she spoke, whatever her intentions were, and the result was just silly.

Hamuel would normally have mentally insulted such a figure with disgust, but at this point her new mistress actually seemed like a reliable person. For starters, the bare fact that she was sitting on the sofa and not complaining was something Hamuel could appreciate. If this were Grim Heart, even in a hotel suite, she would certainly have brought in her throne to sit on.

In that regard, Lethe was possessed of more worldly wisdom. Unlike the incarnations of the Three Sages—Grim Heart chief among them—she'd had many opportunities to involve herself with the world.

They said Lethe enjoyed duels in which both participants put their pride on the line, and that she was drawn to unbeatable strength. Hamuel had even heard that she'd once sneaked into an event run by the now-defunct combat club, the Archfiend Cram School, a move just like something out of a historical drama. "Come now, they may call these the leading fighters, but that's merely among the common people, eh. There aren't many magical girls worthy of respect," Lethe had claimed with unsurprising arrogance over dinner, but if she said there weren't many worth respect, that meant there were at least some.

Grim Heart had been created through a process of experiments to make magical girls of higher performance. She had been a specially manufactured, ultra-high-quality magical girl who had

even been chosen to be an incarnation of one of the Three Sages. Growing cocky in that position, Grim Heart had not seemed to possess such sensitivities of the heart as respect for others. Unlike Grim Heart, Lethe did have modesty and reserve. In other words, Hamuel was grateful to have this type as her superior. Hamuel would even consider her not a cheap substitute for Grim Heart, but rather a superior individual.

"I would figure they plan to attack the ruins, eh," said Lethe.

"Quite likely so," replied Hamuel.

The magical device that had been created by the very first mage, the teacher of the Three Sages, could also be called the treasure of the Magical Kingdom. Mages of ancient times had placed it under heavy seals, and it currently couldn't be used at all, but it was kept under careful management. Its function was to store up the immense magical powers that filled the world and emit them if necessary…or so the stories said. But aside from the Three Sages, there were no living mages who had seen this machine in operation. One theory claimed that when the machine had absorbed too much magic too quickly, the balance of the world had begun to crumble, and in a panic, the mages had stopped it and sealed it away. But no one knew if that was true or not.

The device had been sealed away in ruins in a separate dimension created by magical means. The management of that space had been entrusted to the Osk Faction. Though it had been decided in a conference of the Three Sages that they would use the device to hold the ceremony, it wasn't like the Osks could hand it over immediately, and of course the transfer would take quite some time. So their plan was to use that time to overturn the decision made in the previous meeting. The Puk Faction would probably not be pleased by this idea.

"I figure when the time comes, there'll be a fight," said Lethe.

"Oh, I'm sure there will be," Hamuel agreed.

It had been quite some time since the magical power that filled the world had thinned and the Magical Kingdom had lost the ability to maintain its true form. The mages had chosen of their own accord to split their world into pieces and connect them to countless different worlds to keep the Magical Kingdom in existence by depending on the magic of those other worlds. After creating these detached territories, they called the whole entity the Magical Kingdom. But taking back the old Magical Kingdom had become its

leaders' dearest wish. And the heads of the factions, in particular, had put together a variety of plans to acquire enough magic to restore the Magical Kingdom. It was a self-evident truth that whichever faction made its plans a success would be in a leadership position in the newly created homeland.

Various methods had been tested, but they had all failed. Though plan after plan had been put together, fewer and fewer people believed the Magical Kingdom could actually be restored.

Of these plans, the one the Puk Faction had suggested was to use the power of magical girls to undo the seal on the magic device and reactivate it. The Puks had stubbornly insisted on going through with this plan, but had refused to reveal the details of it to other factions. Of course, the Osk and Caspar Factions had been opposed to the plan, and it had not gone through. However, during the last of the three factions' periodic conferences, the situation had taken a turn when the Caspar Faction had given in, claiming "conditional agreement."

"A fight, eh? Looking forward to it," said Lethe.

Hamuel was not looking forward to it at all, but she smiled back anyway.

Lethe set down her sake cup on the Battenberg lace tablecloth and sank particularly deeply into the sofa. Her eyes remained closed as she sat still for a while, but then she jolted out of her seat and leaned her face close to Hamuel. The sudden movement made Hamuel draw her chair back, and its legs scraped on the floor through the rug.

"Of course I shall fight, too, eh."

This was not the Sengoku period, and it would normally be unthinkable for the general to head the forces and fight on the front lines. But if they were up against one of the incarnations of the Three Sages, they'd be forced to send out their strongest magical girl. The Osk Faction wasn't able to use its incarnation right now, the blame for which largely lay with Grim Heart. That being the case, it had moved down to using its number two, Lethe. Lethe always liked to brag about how one time when she'd joined the Archfiend Cram School, she'd gotten the opportunity to fight Archfiend Pam, the one everyone praised as the strongest magical girl ever, and had barely gotten her to a draw. Hamuel knew the other factions would joke, "When the Osks start bragging, you should only listen to half, or a third," and sadly enough, this was an

accurate assessment. But even just half or a third would be a hell of a lot. Though Lethe was still not powerful enough to be chosen as a Sage incarnation, she was also a specially created magical girl, and a particularly strong one, too. Her abilities far surpassed those of regular magical girls—one supposed.

But still, Hamuel figured it was worth it to warn her. “Please take care not to be too reckless.”

“Of course. I have no desire to die, and it would be a quandary if I were gone.”

“It would be a quandary. A quandary for everyone.”

The heart Shufflin IIs nodded vigorously to express agreement, and Lethe sank back into the sofa. “But still, eh?”

“Yes, my lady?”

“If I found myself in a duel with Puk Puck, I wouldn’t be able to manage.”

Hamuel remembered the video she’d seen on that user-uploaded video site of Puk Puck dancing. Maybe some people would see that and think, *Is* that *really so strong?* but judging the strength of a magical girl by her superficial appearance was the height of foolishness. Puk Puck’s strength was in her magic, after all.

“You…wouldn’t?” Hamuel asked.

“Not at all. If Puk Puck and I come to cross swords, I shall run.”

Hamuel couldn’t criticize this as irresponsible. After all, some enemies you had no other choice but to flee.

In fact, she could even commend Lethe as a wise general for not letting her ego get the best of her as she charged into certain death. Since Grim Heart, who had been created to counter Puk Puck, was not in the picture, they should assume she would be too much for them to handle.

“I do plan to avoid a direct clash with Puk, though,” said Lethe.

“A wise decision.”

“If such a time comes, Hamuel…”

“Yes, my lady?”

“…you fight Puk. Ensure you buy as much time as possible, eh. I’ll use that time to flee.”

Hamuel failed to immediately grasp what she had just heard, then mulled it over, but nevertheless was still very far from understanding. Lethe certainly did not look like she was joking. Before Hamuel could consider the matter any further, she waved

her hand back and forth in front of her face and shook her head even more rapidly than that. “Oh no, no, no!”

“None of this ‘no’ business.”

“But I wouldn’t stand a chance against her!”

“Ensure you do manage it, even if it’s impossible, eh. Listen, don’t think you have a way out of this. You mustn’t forget that you were originally supposed to have been doing something else, somewhere else even more frightening.”

Hamuel was speechless. After having been entrusted with a whole set of Shufflin IIs, then getting nearly all of them destroyed and failing to capture Premium Sachiko—actually, she’d basically failed to do anything—only to more or less shamelessly flee the scene and come crawling back to base, she was not allowed to whine or complain. The excuse *“I was attacked by a Shufflin hunter come back from the dead”* wouldn’t pass with anyone in the Osk Faction.

“Mm-hmm.” Lethe nodded, looking quite satisfied.

Hamuel wasn’t the least bit satisfied, but she couldn’t argue to Lethe’s face, and so she let her head hang with a weak “Agh.” Her positive evaluation of Lethe now evaporated, she fumed internally: *The upper ranks of the Osk Faction are all the same, this devil’s child doesn’t even see people as people. She won’t even claim that when crisis comes calling, she’ll put her life on the line to save those who serve her?*

About fifteen minutes after Hamuel politely accepted her death sentence, a five of clubs ran into the room without knocking, coming up to Lethe’s side to lean close to her ear and whisper something. Lethe did not take her to task for her rudeness, nodding and saying only, “Show her in.”

Hamuel stood and turned over the cushion she’d been sitting on, then moved to a corner of the room, diagonally behind Lethe, to the left. She stood proud with her shoulders back, keeping her fists squeezed gently in front of her stomach. She was nervous. And she thought that wasn’t unreasonable. Anyone, not only Hamuel, would be nervous about being present for the coming situation.

“Pardon me.”

“Come in.” Lethe got to her feet and extended a hand to her visitor. She kept a spade and a heart Shufflin positioned one on each side. “I’m Lethe. My thanks for coming today.”

This was someone Lethe would actually be gracious with, after all. There weren’t many people like that in the Osk Faction—just

Chêne Osk Baal Mel, or her incarnation.

There were two visitors.

One was in a well-fitted gray suit, with her hair twisted into a ponytail, her wire-framed glasses flashing under the light of the chandelier. She could equally pass for someone in their late teens or their midforties; her age was difficult to place. If you were told she was a competent woman, you'd think, *Indeed*, and if you were told she was a slacker, you'd think, *I bet she is*—she was hard to grasp, or rather, she gave off an air of mystery. However, from her fairly plain and grounded appearance, at the very least, she was not a magical girl.

The second visitor came in with her hand being pulled. She looked the type to get pulled around by the hand. Her eyes and mouth were covered by layers of braided cords that were absolutely swarming in brightly colored patterns that had to have some kind of magical meaning. More were wrapped all around her body, too, so despite her being all dressed up in what seemed to be a kimono, her outfit was hardly visible. The lock of silver hair that poked out slightly was beautiful enough to make you sigh, so even hidden from sight, you could tell she was a magical girl.

But she seemed to be struggling to walk at all, regardless of the blindfold—she was tottering along with her hand being pulled, bumping her shin on a chair, bumping her shoulder on the door, and each time she bumped into something, she made a cute noise like a yelp or a moan.

The human woman took Lethe's hand and firmly squeezed it back. "I'm pleased to meet you, Lethe. This is Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami."

Yes, this was their first meeting. Having been selected so suddenly for her aptitude for combat, Lethe had never met this incarnation—Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami. And that meant others might well look down on her and see her as inexperienced. It was not good to be in that position of disrespect before negotiations even began, when they were already dealing with an incarnation of one of the Three Sages. Lethe had to understand that as well, as she wore an utterly serene smile.

Hands still clasped, the pair gazed at one another for a while, and then the woman went, "Ahh" and nodded. "Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami is in a state, as you can see, so you'll be unable to converse with her directly. I, Yoshioka, will be interpreting for her.

And just as she cannot speak, she is also unable to eat or drink, so she shall be refraining from any refreshments or beverages as well."

Was "in a state, as you can see" humor, her standard joke, or was it that something so incredibly rude had fallen from her lips naturally? Hamuel didn't know, and she didn't have the right to ask. Lethe offered no particular response, prompting the two of them to sit, and so the interpreter Yoshioka, as well as Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami, Sage incarnation, wobbled over to the bench where Hamuel had been and took a seat. Even the most mundane of movements looked very arduous for the incarnation.

"Well then, my lady Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami," began Lethe.

"Oh, just Ratsumu will do. It would be such a hassle for you to address her by her full name; it's quite the mouthful." Yoshioka cut her off as if it were her own business, and since Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami did not take her to task for her rudeness, following that, they called Ratsumukana-honome-no-kami Ratsumu.

Lethe did not ask anything like, *"She couldn't even hear it in the first place, could she?"* or *"Even if she could, could she even talk anyway?"* So Hamuel wouldn't say those things, either.

"About the next meeting," Lethe said.

"We will agree to the resuspension of the device," replied Yoshioka. "It was also unexpected for us that the Puk Faction has been taking such rapid action. Our soft landing plan of establishing constraints and using them to restrain imprudent misuse has already fallen apart."

It seemed as if this woman's interpretation was not interpretation at all, and she was just talking freely of her own accord, but was that Hamuel's imagination? Glancing over, she saw that the other end of the chain on the restraints binding Ratsumu's hands and feet was in the interpreter's hands, and, realizing that the woman had not been pulling Ratsumu's hand but tugging on her chain, Hamuel slowly averted her eyes.

"And so you say you will be voting for resuspension?" said Lethe.

"Yes. Unlike you and yours, and the Puk Faction, we were few in number and lacking in funds, nothing but a worthless minor faction. Nevertheless, a vote is a vote. And as long as we have this single vote—"

"Your conditions?"

“If we might have your guarantee that we will receive twenty percent of the rights for the new development enterprise currently being planned.”

“The paperwork?”

“Right here.”

“Hamuel, the seal.”

Some people out there would flip sides like playing cards for the sake of personal gain. Making good use of such types could keep conflicts down to a minimum. If they could make the resuspension of the device pass during the next meeting, that meant they only needed to stall the Puk Faction from acting until that meeting.

As a victory condition, nothing could be better. A political resolution could enable them to achieve their goal without spilling a drop of blood. But they couldn’t forget there was trouble brewing in the Puk Faction. This maneuver would postpone the enemy’s plans, but they couldn’t just let their opponent be. They had to firm up their defenses, so that if the Puks caused a situation, the Osks would be able to swiftly gain supremacy. They were currently engaged in additional rapid construction of a new type of magic barrier to protect the ruins, and they were saying that once it was done, it would be as impenetrable as a magical fortress.

But in order to do that, first, they had to manage this contract now. When Hamuel handed her a large, twenty-inch-square crystal stamp, Lethe raised it aloft.

Right before stamping the document, she leaned her face close to the interpreter’s, and the interpreter drew back, flinching. “Our collateral is military and financial might—you understand that, eh?”

“…We do.”

“There are a variety of benefits for both parties, if the Osk and Caspar Factions join hands. And not simply in terms of immediate benefit—it will bear fruit all the way to our grandchildren’s generation. Think of it as like acquiring a goose that lays golden eggs. This is our collateral of financial might. And if the need arises, then our military might will be of use. The Osk Faction will invest all forces to face the enemy, regardless of our own loss or gain… Yes, I can envision Puk Puck’s crying face.”

Threats were cheap, but when they came from the mouth of a magical girl in the position to carry them out, their value increased.

“Yes,” the interpreter replied with a smile and a nod. But as she

stamped the documents, her hand was trembling slightly.

◇ Pfle

The Magical Girl Resources Department's strength lay in its ability to put the right person in the right job, such as by assigning desk work to a specialist in desk work. The idea that you had to go out on your own two feet to gather information was simply looking at only one side of matters—the one who hired and supervised those people doing the legwork had to be very capable, or they would not be able to manage that information.

Having her people investigate the activity of the Puk Faction and Puk Puck, and having instructed them on what to do following that, Pfle left the Magical Girl Resources Department Headquarters. From here on out awaited work that only Pfle could do. Using the teleport gate, she headed for the Inspection Department. Under the guise of simplicity and austerity and out of consideration for the budget, the department headquarters hadn't been renovated.

She had made the appointment a little earlier, over the phone.

Pfle wheeled through a passageway whose roof seemed ready to collapse at any moment, stopping in front of some gladiolas in a vase that conferred a touch of beauty to their drab environs. The receptionist of the Inspection Department, who was showing Pfle there, knocked on a heavy wooden door, and when she heard a voice say, "Come in," giving them permission to enter, she turned the knob. With a smile to Pfle and an outstretched palm, she prompted, "This way." It seemed that installing someone with a great smile at reception, out of a consideration for public image, was universal.

Smiling back at her, Pfle graciously said, "Thank you," and headed inside.

This room was probably used to receive guests. The decor was reminiscent of a school principal's office: two sofas facing each other, a dark-green carpet that really clashed with them, trophies atop the shelf, and framed certificates on the walls. There was a simple charm to it; it was the kind of thing someone who manages none of the interior design at home and leaves it all to their family would come up with through a lot of earnest effort, and the person who was waiting for her in that room had the same sort of

simplicity.

"Hey. It's been quite some time," Pfle greeted her.

"Yes, it has," Mana responded reluctantly, as if the very act of opening her mouth was tiresome. Pfle hadn't seen her since they'd first met, when 7753 had introduced them. Pfle's daily records included a note about their meeting, but it was entirely unclear what specifically they had talked about. Her recollection of their meeting was vague no matter how much she tried to remember—yet more evidence that Pfle's memory had been tampered with.

She had assumed this would be easy with Mana's proactive cooperation, but seeing her now, it seemed doubtful that their discussion then had gone well. *Well, then, that's fine*, Pfle thought, accepting the situation easily. Pulling her wheelchair up beside the sofa, she grabbed the arms with both her hands to raise herself, doing a turn to the side in midair to land gently on the sofa.

Pfle's acrobatic maneuver made Mana knit her eyebrows in slight confusion.

"Seeing as you went to the trouble to have a sofa there for me, I thought it rude not to use it," said Pfle.

"Oh, not at all."

7753 trusted Mana, and Mana neither tried to suck up to Pfle nor avoided her with a superficial attitude of respect—she just hated her. And she didn't try to hide that attitude. She was confused by Pfle's sudden move, but she didn't criticize her for it. Pfle got an idea of what kind of person Mana was based on other observations as well: the movements of her face, her gestures, the way she held her cup, her conscious attempt at manners.

Wetting her mouth with the black tea that had been served to her, Pfle smiled with satisfaction. The tea leaves were good, the pour had been done correctly, and the cup had been appropriately warmed, too. Setting down the teacup, she turned to face Mana.

"To tell the truth, we're rather in the midst of a crisis."

"Uh-huh." Mana's response was dull, probably out of suspicion toward Pfle. Pfle couldn't remember what they had discussed during that one conversation, but this mage's suspicions were enough to help Pfle get to know her. She was someone worth trusting.

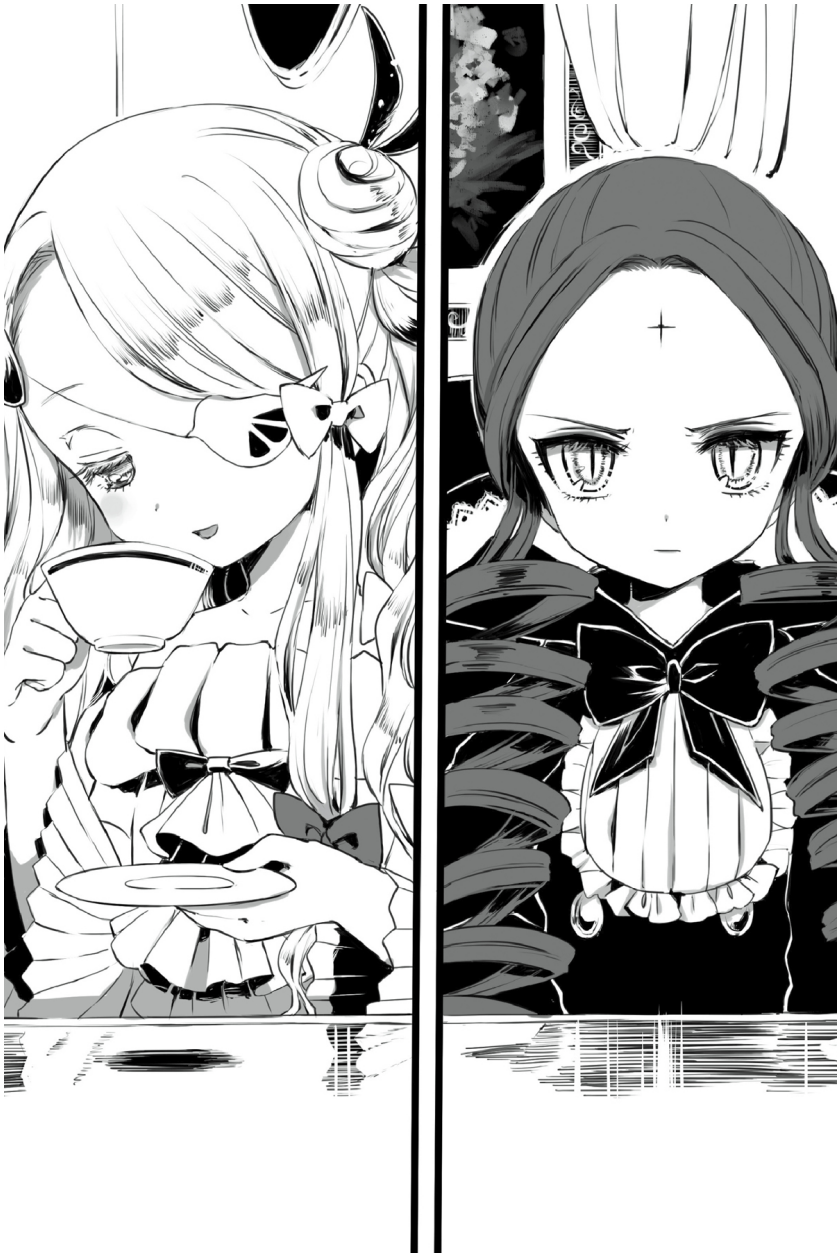
"I've come here to turn myself in."

Mana's expression darkened. The irritation in her eyes turned to even clearer loathing, and the angle between her eyebrows

deepened, making her practically glare. Leaning forward, she laid her elbows on her knees, fingers folded. If not for her youthful appearance, she'd be very like a detective investigating a devious criminal. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said."

"Just what have you gotten up to?"



The respectful tone that Mana had been using because Pfle was basically the chief of a department was also beginning to peel away.

With a certain sense of satisfaction at having drawn such a reaction from her, Pfle continued. “The problem is that I don’t know.”

“What?” Mana’s face twisted in blatant loathing.

Pfle raised her hands to the other girl.

“Oh, this is neither a bad joke nor an attempt to tease you.” Though mentally she stuck in the addendum *but I think it would be fun to tease you*. She didn’t say that out loud, of course.

“I don’t have a complete grasp on what it is that I’ve done, as it seems my memory has been robbed from me by magic. So I also can’t at all recall what it was we spoke about the last time we met.”

“Well, even if you are lying,” Mana practically spat, “I could drag you in for obstruction or slander.”

“While I would appreciate that, this is no falsehood. You may think it strange that someone who doesn’t remember the facts could make such a declaration, but I can deduce some things based on pieces of the facts.”

“So you came here to hand yourself in based purely on guesswork?”

“I am the principal offender, and Shadow Gale is my accomplice—or so it seems. However, such memories are not in my possession. Shadow Gale should know where they are. She’s captive in the Puk estate. She’s been kidnapped. Could you get her back for me?”

The angle in Mana’s brow relaxed slightly. But her expression didn’t say that she trusted what Pfle was saying so much as that she just found all of this dubious. “She’s confined there?”

“That’s right. She’s being confined against her will.”

“If it’s true that she’s being confined, then all this about your crimes aside, we will take action.”

“The other party will not acknowledge that this is confinement, and due to magic, Shadow Gale herself will likely not believe herself to be confined. If we were to go save her, on account of these factors, I could easily anticipate you would be convinced that *Oh, she wasn’t confined, after all*, and then you’d come back.”

Mana knitted her eyebrows again, this time even more deeply

than before.

Pfle slowly shook her head. “I have no ulterior motive here. I’m saying I’m outclassed.”

“By whom?”

“By the incarnation of one of the Three Sages, Av Lapati Puk Baltha—Puk Puck.”

All at once, Mana’s expression drew taut. Or would it be more accurate to say her muscles had stiffened up from anxiety? To mages like Mana, the Three Sages were absolute. If you kept going up and up, from *the master of my master…*, then no matter what mage it was, you’d wind up at the Three Sages. All mages saw them as great pioneers; there was a level of sacredness to them. Normally, even if a Sage incarnation had kidnapped a magical girl, no mage would ever try to interfere.

However, the mage in front of Pfle was not necessarily normal.

“In other words, I mean this,” Pfle said. “One of my subordinates, Shadow Gale, has been kidnapped and imprisoned. By a magical girl who is an incarnation of one of the Three Sages.”

Mana blanched. It was impressive that she did nothing worse. A normal mage would have yelled at Pfle and immediately driven her out, then pretended she’d never heard any of it.

To make doubly sure, Pfle added one more thing. “I hear Snow White is now a member of the Inspection Department. Reports indicate that she is working under Puk Puck. If that’s true, then I would assume this would also be a matter for your department to investigate.”

Mana leaned forward even farther, glaring over the long table with a pained expression. No matter how she might suffer, Pfle knew the conclusion she would ultimately come to. Pfle was confident that she had not misread the sort of person Mana was. Pfle had looked up her profile, and she had also seen the individual herself directly.

The magical girl whom Mana had admired like an older sister had been killed by a criminal magical girl. She loathed wrongdoing, and sought to punish those who committed it. She was overly serious, stubborn, and valued principles, and she would think that pulling back an investigation because the target was an important person would be the greatest shame of all, as well as equivalent to being complicit in the crime. That was a very fine spirit, for an inspector. Normally, Pfle would maintain a respectful distance from

this type. She would have liked to avoid engaging with her, if possible. But now things were different. Mana would become a force with which to oppose Puk Puck. It would also be valuable to have the backing of the Inspection Department.

Mana never did put her thoughts into words. Pfle was escorted to a different room, and though she avoided any ropes or cuffs, she was put under watch. As she spoke to the brusque man who was her guard, Pfle's ears were inclined to the flurry of footsteps running outside her room.

Hana Gekokujou's death had driven into Mana's heart like a linchpin. She would not make compromises when it came to justice, and she would try to continue being a just inspector. Even up against a powerful political force, she would not give way, and she would rise to face it. She would act exactly as Pfle had expected she would.

All of these events were enough for Mamori Totoyama alone to act contrary to expectations.

◇ Uluru

Something had changed inside her, but it was difficult to put into words. Uluru hadn't had a lot of words to begin with, and most of all, she'd been so confused, too. She'd wanted to get Puk Puck to listen to her, but Puk Puck had simply trudged past without even looking at her. She'd also taken away Uluru's only memento of Sachiko, the contract, and now Uluru had nothing left.

And even when she had returned to her room just as Puk Puck had told her to hug her knees and sit, all that came to mind was unpleasant thought after unpleasant thought.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. Sorami and Sachiko were both gone. Puk Puck was still there, but Uluru couldn't bring herself to feel like she could really rely on her. Puk Puck was always in the center of the world, and it made her happier than anything to work for Puk Puck's sake. She'd thought that if she simply did what Puk Puck said, she'd never go wrong. Deep down, however, Uluru was shaking, cold and clammy with anxiety. She was trying to think about Puk Puck and nothing else, but she couldn't think about her as well as she had before.

She wanted to think of Puk Puck. But she couldn't do it.

Sachiko and Sorami were both gone and Uluru was the sole survivor. The only one who could serve Puk Puck was Uluru, but she couldn't manage to think about Puk Puck, the one she served, very well.

Uluru hugged her knees even tighter.

It wasn't as if she *couldn't* think. She just couldn't think *well*. The only thoughts that surfaced were how earlier it had seemed like Puk Puck was disinterested in Uluru, and that it hadn't looked as if Puk Puck was thinking of the recently deceased Sorami and Sachiko, and it had looked as if she didn't care if Sachiko was gone, as long as she had her contract. Uluru tried to chase away these thoughts, but they resurfaced every time, and no matter how she chased them off over and over again, they just kept popping up.

And about Sachiko, too. She'd said she didn't want anyone else to meet misfortune because of her magic. What was Puk Puck trying to use Sachiko's contract for? Uluru had heard she was using it in a ceremony, but not what the ceremony was for. Uluru had never questioned it—she'd taken for granted that it was the right thing and had obeyed Puk Puck. There had been something like a big pillar she could lean on there, and now it was like that pillar had been erased, and she felt so forlorn, and Sorami and Sachiko, who had supported her, were gone, and she was staying on her feet alone on her wobbly legs, but that was so hard, and she felt like she was about to fall.

If she were Sachiko, would she be able to pull off an escape?

If she were Sorami, would she be able to gently turn this aside?

What could Uluru do? It was her magic that was good at lying, not Uluru. She was absolutely terrible at lying. She couldn't even lie to herself.

No matter how she thought and thought, it wouldn't produce anything good, and it was the most she could do to just restrain tears. Still curled up holding her knees, she rolled down onto the futon, then came up again to swing in the opposite direction like a roly-poly toy, pressing her cheek to the tatami. A long time ago, before she'd become a magical girl, Sachiko had gotten marks on her cheeks from the flooring from sleeping on the floor, and they'd remained there for so long, everyone had laughed at her. Uluru had laughed the most of all, and Sorami, while laughing herself, had said, "If you laugh that hard, then I'll feel bad for her." Sachiko had been the one person rubbing her cheek and asking worriedly, "This

will go away, right?"

Pushing off the tatami, Uluru got to her feet. If she didn't pay attention, she'd wind up thinking about things other than Puk Puck. She couldn't focus on the past right now; she had to think about the present. But when she tried to think about Puk Puck, she couldn't help but think of awful things, and then the distant past, things that had been fun, things that had made her glad, rose in her mind of their own accord. Uluru was supposed to be the eldest, but with the way she was currently acting, she'd be setting a bad example for Sorami and Sachiko. And yet she remained paralyzed anyway.

She walked in circles around the room. When she didn't move her body, she felt like she was going to rot right there. She had to move even just a little, to get her blood circulating to her extremities, so she could properly think and consider, so she could be useful to everyone.

Uluru walked. She walked and walked, over the four corners, around the border of the room, from one end to another, in circles around the center where the string of the florescent light hung. It felt like she was spiraling more and more tightly into the middle. She felt like she was far away from Puk Puck. So Uluru opened up the paper screen door and came out into the hallway. She strode briskly down the hall. All the other residents, both magical girl and otherwise, seemed busy. It was like they didn't have the time to even look at her.

Uluru and her sisters included, the people who gathered around Puk Puck had particularly firm loyalty. But the people she'd seen just now were beyond any measure of normal allegiance. Uluru even got the sense from them that if Puk Puck wouldn't have stopped them, they would cut her down for being a nuisance. Something in this mansion was going awry. A vague sense of unease rose from the ground at her feet. Uluru walked at the edges so she wouldn't get in the way. She moved from empty spot to empty spot until before she knew it, there was no one around her anymore.

If she wasn't going to think about Sorami or Sachiko, and if she wasn't going to think about Puk Puck, either, then there was only one person who would come to mind: Snow White.

The one who'd killed Sachiko had been a friend of Snow White's. At least they'd acted like friends, and Snow White had acknowledged as much. That was why Snow White was locked up in the reception room. Uluru had insisted that they should lock her

up, and though Puk Puck had opposed it, saying that they didn't have to go that far, Uluru had gotten her way in the end.

So was Sachiko killed by a magical girl who came here led by Snow White? she wondered. Thinking about Sachiko, spurting blood from her neck as she collapsed, made Uluru feel ready to burst. *But we were so close, it was just one more step*—she had agonized so much, but that wasn't bringing Sachiko back.

They'd cleaned up the mess of blood from Sachiko's face and made her look like when she'd been alive—not Premium Sachiko, but with the human Sachiko's face, and she lay there, her eyes closed. Uluru had clung to Sachiko and wept, but Sachiko had still not gotten up. The hand in Uluru's grasp had gone cold like an iron stick. Uluru had cried, she'd cried enough for her eyes to melt and fall apart, and then she'd cried still.

Puk Puck had shown her face once and shed tears in remembrance of Sachiko and Sorami, and then she'd hurriedly pattered off somewhere. Though there were a mountain of things Uluru wanted to say about the two of them, she hadn't been able to talk with Puk Puck, and so, alone again, she had cried. The more she cried, the more she couldn't understand why Sachiko had died. What the heck was up with Snow White's friend? What the heck was up with Snow White?

Walking down the hallway, she came to a dead end.

She wanted to hear what Snow White had to say. Though it had only been a short while that she had worked with her, she felt as if they'd been together a long time. Uluru pulled out her toy rifle and held it in one hand. Standing in front of the reception room, she used the key in her pocket to open the door.

"Snow White!"

The magical girl in white sitting in the chair there slowly opened her eyes and looked up at Uluru.

CHAPTER 2
SNOW WHITE AND THE SHEPHERD

◇ **Mana**

Mana had been opposed to the Inspection Department's hiring someone with as violent a nickname as "Magical-Girl Hunter"—even if she was a contractor. But Mana had been overruled.

Snow White was an honorary resident of the Magical Kingdom, a position that made her a real hassle to deal with, and she had exposed a number of problem magical girls in the past. The reasonable idea "Someone without the right of arrest can't be allowed to play cop" had been stripped of its backbone by the unreasonable idea "Well, so then we should just make her a cop." And so Snow White had become a contracted member of the Inspection Department. Apparently Snow White herself hadn't been interested at all, but through some wheedling, the department had somehow gotten her to agree. Since Mana had diligently studied for the job before knocking on the Inspection Department's doors to say, "I'm going to become a great investigator," that whole debacle had made her want to spit.

So that story was part of the reason Mana didn't have a great opinion of Snow White. She'd only had one opportunity to work with her. Though Snow White had not turned out to be a demon of battle endlessly seeking blood as the rumors claimed, she had been unacceptably rude.

But still, Mana was an adult. Or rather, she had become an adult.

Before, she definitely would have yelled at Snow White and snapped at her for her attitude, but instead she had just made her displeasure clear, barely restraining any substantial emissions of anger. Partly this was because Snow White's mascot had been so

earnestly deferential, repeatedly saying things like, “It’s not like she’s trying to be mean,” “She’s easily misunderstood,” “She’s actually a good girl,” “Joining the Inspection Department has been her dream,” and “We respect you guys, seriously,” surprising the anger out of her.

That mascot aside, Mana had a very low opinion of Snow White as an individual. Back when they still worked together, they’d only engaged in the minimal necessary exchanges. Once the job was done, all Mana had thought was, “In the future, I’d like to avoid working with her again.”

Wishes of this sort would generally not come true.

The Inspection Department had direct passage gates at various hubs, but of course none of them took you straight to an estate belonging to an incarnation of one of the Three Sages. Even from the gate that was closest to W City, you would go to the hub in the neighboring prefecture, and from there you would get in a vehicle and take the highway to the Puk Puck estate.

Shadow Gale’s kidnapping and imprisonment, Pfle’s strange surrender, and Snow White, who could no longer be reached—with all these things happening, if Mana chose to not act out of fear of the Three Sages, then she couldn’t call herself a member of the Inspection Department anymore.

And besides, maybe this was connected to the incident that had happened in B City.

Mana had been investigating the B City incident. She was still investigating it now. She just had to know what had happened, why the people who had been killed there had to die. She even thought that she couldn’t go on with her life unless she had the answers. Whenever her mind turned back to that incident, it brought pain and distress as if her insides were boiling.

Mana’s group was supposed to have been chasing down a so-called assassin magical girl, but then, for some reason, several villainous magical girls who had escaped from prison had barged in. Two Inspection Department employees had died on the job, and the tragic incident had resulted in the deaths of many, regular people as well as local magical girls. Afterward, Mana had tried to learn more about what had happened, but it was a complex tangle of secret activities and interests of various departments, and it was functionally like there had been a gag order, making it bone-

breakingly difficult to do an aboveboard investigation. And because she had hardly any know-how or connections, it had required further bone-breaking efforts for Mana to investigate under the table. With the cooperation of the veteran magical girl 7753, who was a member of Magical Girl Resources, she'd deduced some things from the information that she'd acquired, while she'd also heard that Pfle, the boss of Magical Girl Resources, had recently been investigated. Apparently, she hadn't been found guilty, but it wasn't as if she was necessarily found innocent. She had simply not been declared guilty.

Mana had met with Pfle just once, through 7753's introduction. She was a whole ball of dubiousness. Mana wouldn't be surprised by anything she got up to, and she had no clue what Pfle was doing.

And that was the person who had visited the Inspection Department, saying, *"Arrest me."* Mana could see right through her and her casual intention to use the Inspection Department—but despite that, she'd also seen a glimpse of a sort of self-destructiveness in her, or perhaps desperation. She was determined to accomplish this, even if it meant abandoning her status—or even being a magical girl entirely. That was why Mana was doing this. Maybe she was being manipulated, but she'd decided that she was going to do something. And so she went to the Puk Puck estate.

"How excellent that you work so quickly."

Pfle was currently being made to wait in the reception room of the Inspection Department. However, her constant calling through her magical phone made it feel as if she were not far at all. Mana tried to tell her that she couldn't talk on the phone while driving, but Pfle didn't listen, saying, "I'll simply be speaking of my own accord, so just leave it on and have it on the passenger's side seat." It hadn't been settled that she was a sort of suspect, so they had to keep treating her as a guest, even if only in form, and they couldn't confiscate her magical phone. Mana considered having a stern word with the staff keeping watch on her, but Pfle would probably talk her way out of it somehow. In the end, smooth talkers would get ahead.

"I would like to leave the matter of the Puk Faction to the Osk Faction, but they've been reluctant to act of late—or I might say they haven't been proactive. I wish Inspection could take a page from their book."

Every time Pfle opened her mouth, Mana became more

irritated, but it wasn't as if she were the type to listen if Mana told her to shut up. And when Mana said, "There's no reason for me to speak with you," Pfle replied quite smoothly and reasonably, "If a member of the Inspection Department were to visit and ask to see the Sage incarnation, they would receive treatment worse than getting driven away at the gates. If you use my influence, the gates will open for you, at least, even without an appointment."

Mana would be letting the head of another department help in Inspection work—and not just any department head, but the very person who had pretended to turn herself in, saying, *"It seems I've committed a crime."* Plus, Mana would be leaving this visit to an incarnation of one of the Three Sages in the hands of the aforementioned suspect, and she had no intention of reporting it to her higher-ups, either.

Any one of these things on its own was enough of a scandal to put the one on this case—Mana—out of a job. But consulting her own bosses about this would just be a waste of time. It would take a full day for them to reach a conclusion at the very least, and, worst case, it would be made so that the Inspection Department was never involved in the matter at all. She wasn't going to let that happen. She was sick of being forced to let the bad guys get away. If Hana had been there, maybe she would have tried to stop her. But when she remembered Hana, she couldn't bear to stop. A great investigator like Hana would never have twisted or bent the straight core within herself.

Swaying in the car, worrying and agonizing with thoughts like, *Is this really a good idea?* and *Should I have called my father, at least?* and *Who cares if I get punished for going too far on my own judgment?* she drove. Pfle either wasn't aware of Mana's worries or was aware and went ahead anyway, chattering at Mana without a care in the world. Not only that, but she also acted overly friendly.

"The car navigation is telling me if we continue along the highway from here, we'll get stuck in a long traffic jam. You should leave the highway for now and go onto the bypass."

"How can you see my car navigation from there?"

"It's all the same for me to check traffic information from my end, isn't it? Oh yes, and though you should make haste, take care not to drive too fast. It's not that I don't trust in your driving, but it would be pointless if you were to wind up taking more time instead."

“All right.”

“Also, wouldn’t regular people see you as a middle school girl driving a car? Would you not stand out as odd and get stopped by the police?”

“The car has a spell on it to alter perception so that magical girls can drive it.”

“Oh-ho, the Inspection Department is always so thorough. Oh, so then would they attach a transmitter or some such to the vehicle?”

“No, there’s nothing.”

“Excellent. And oh yes, what about your license? If you were stuck at a checkpoint or something and you were to take out your license, would that cause issues?”

“It’s all right. More importantly, I can’t concentrate on driving when you’re talking to me.”

“Oh, pardon me.”

She spoke with such levity that it was bound to offend, and then she wasn’t ashamed of it at all.

“And oh yes, about Puk Puck’s magic.”

The way she brought up something important like this as if she’d just remembered it now was irritating, too.

“Whoever sees her is charmed. You will come to wish most sincerely to be friends with Puk Puck, to be useful to her. This will most certainly be a barrier to this investigation, so take care how you handle her. If they tell you, ‘Lady Puk wishes to see you,’ I would avoid casually following them in.”

“How do you know what magic an incarnation of one of the Three Sages has?”

“Well, because I’m the head of Magical Girl Resources. And besides, she’s uploaded some videos of herself online, so she’s well known through that avenue. Her videos are said to be so wonderful, they steal the hearts of all who see them, which led to parties such as the Osk Faction looking into the matter. Why would she decide to publicize her own magic like that? Did she want to test her power, or was it an experiment? Or perhaps it was just for fun.”

“…So you’re saying the reason the Osk Faction has been holding back is because they know about Lady Puk Puck’s magic?”

“No, that’s not why. It’s because they lack a pretext for action. The Osk Faction is thinking, *We’ll still make it in time if we wait for the Puk Faction to act before crushing them, so for now, let’s just get*

ready. It's difficult to say if they're being scrupulous about preparation or taking things too slowly. Well, we may be able to spur them into action."

◇ Uluru

Uluru had wanted Snow White treated like a criminal, locked up someplace like a closet or a warehouse, but Puk Puck had not approved of that, and so Snow White was in the reception room. All the furnishings, from the long table and the credenza to the fancy chandelier and other interior lighting, were in the sort of adorable style that Puk liked, but their cheer did not suit Snow White right now. Instead, they made Uluru even more irritated.

"Snow White! That friend of yours… She killed Sachiko…!" There were so many things Uluru had meant to talk about, but when she saw Snow White's face, they all flew away. Her anger provoked her into smacking the door. The door didn't shut, bouncing back in the other direction, so she closed it normally, though with irritation, this time not slamming it, just closing it a bit loudly.

Turning back, Uluru looked down on Snow White, drawing her eyebrows together in suspicion. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Snow White replied.

That was not the reaction Uluru had anticipated, and it was also a bit different from the Snow White Uluru knew. She was more suspicious than angry. "Nothing? It's not nothing. That friend of yours—"

"She was just being controlled."

Uluru bit her lip and glared at Snow White. "So that means I'm supposed to forgive her?!"

"The one who did it was Frederica. Pythie Frederica."

"You, you…" Uluru punched the credenza with a tightly clenched fist, and the glasses inside rattled. "*You!* You're the Magical-Girl Hunter, aren't you?! You hunt bad magical girls, don't you?! Why're you talking like it's someone else's problem?!"

Snow White had been hanging her head as she listened, and by the time she slowly brought it up again, her previously expressionless face was hideously twisted.

The anger and hate oozing from her expression made Uluru reflexively bring her hand away from the credenza, and then, when

she realized, she grabbed the corner of the credenza again. “Snow White, you…”

“Why are you even talking about this to me?” Snow White demanded.

“Huh?”

“Do you want something from me? Is that why you came here?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m sick of this.” Snow White stood.

Uluru’s right hand released the credenza, and she spread her palm to look down on it. She hadn’t been burned. She’d felt so much heat, she’d checked automatically.

“Why do you think I’ll save you? Why?!”

Uluru put a hand to her waist and opened her mouth, about to say something, but then closed her mouth without speaking and bit her lip. Even without Uluru’s saying anything, Snow White would be able to tell with painful clarity how at a loss she was.

“You…,” Uluru began, but the words wouldn’t come out. The Snow White Uluru had known was always calm. Uluru had been so fed up and irritated over that, and whenever something had happened, Sorami and even Sachiko would look toward Snow White, and Uluru had been so angry, just so hopelessly angry. But when she thought about how she was now coming to Snow White herself, she realized she’d been looking toward Snow White the whole time, too.

“What are you talking about?” Uluru demanded. “You’re cold and grouchy, but—but still, you were still kind of someone we could rely on. Sachiko and Sorami both relied on you way more than Uluru, and Uluru was so mad about that—”

“Don’t force me to be whoever you imagined me to be. I’m sick of it. Of everything.”

There was now not even a trace of that calm that had once driven Uluru so crazy. When you’re faced with something outrageous, you’ll look for somewhere to vent your anger and hate. Uluru understood that well—because she was totally the same.

Drawing Snow White toward her, with a *clunk*, she pressed Snow White’s forehead against her own. “You! Snow White! You’re a magical girl, aren’t you?!”

Snow White grabbed Uluru by the collar to put some distance between them, and then, after pulling away, she struck their foreheads together again with a *whack*. The pain and the impact

were overwhelming. Uluru didn't hit only her forehead, but her nose, too, blood spurting from it. Snow White glared at her, and she took it head-on, glaring back at her without flinching, close enough that she could feel her breath.

"You're a good magical girl, right?!" yelled Uluru. "You beat the bad guys, right?! If you're just lost in a rage! And you charge in there! That's what the enemy wants! That's making the one controlling your friend happy! You don't want that, right?! So! So just! Show me more how a good magical girl acts, okay?!"

Snow White's expression twisted not in anger but in shock. She could surely hear the voice of Uluru's heart. Uluru didn't want Snow White to be acting purely in hate and anger. So she was talking like a little kid in an attempt to win her over. A droplet of blood oozed down from her nose, and Uluru waved off Snow White's hand, wiping her nose with her sleeve. Snow White turned to the side with a pained expression, swinging a fist into empty air. She looked up at the ceiling, then turned back to Uluru. The level of anger in her expression was even greater than before.

"Shut up!" Snow White suddenly yelled at her.

"What do you mean, 'shut up'?!" Refusing to back down, Uluru yelled back.

"Why do people always have to talk to me like that?! I never asked anyone to call me the Magical-Girl Hunter, but people do it anyway, so you can't tell me to take responsibility here!"

"I'm saying to keep up the front to the end, at least!"

"I was never trying to put up a front!"

"That's not what I'm talking about!"

"I'm done with magical girls! I don't care anymore!"

It was as if a dam had burst. There was no logic or anything in her—she was shaking her head at whatever Uluru said to shoot it down. It wasn't as if she were plugging her ears, but nothing was going in them. But even if whatever had been pulled taut and tense inside her had now burst, Uluru didn't want to abandon Snow White in her despair. Uluru had always meant to be standing in front of Sorami and Sachiko, protecting them from stormy seas or headwinds or whatnot, but wondering now just how useful she had been, she didn't know. The one thing she could say was that she had confidence when it came to acting like a big sister.

"What're you gonna do about your friend? She's being controlled, right? Are you gonna leave her like that?"

Snow White glared at Uluru and tried to grab at her, too, but when she did, Uluru pushed her back. Normally, Snow White would have casually avoided a push from Uluru, but she wound up on her bottom on her chair with no resistance. Uluru looked down on her. For the first time since Uluru had met her, Snow White just looked like a girl.

"Are you just gonna abandon her? Your friend went off all alone, and you're not going to do anything about that? Uluru's not abandoning her. Uluru's gonna chase down your friend, and Uluru's gonna find out about the one who was controlling her. Uluru's gonna get revenge for Sachiko. Uluru's never gonna forgive this."

With a start, Snow White looked back at Uluru.

Uluru continued, "Uluru's going. What're you gonna do? Are you gonna lie around here?"

Snow White was looking up at Uluru. Her expression seemed to prompt her to continue.

"Uluru's gonna get you out of here and chase after your friend. Then Uluru's gonna get revenge for Sachiko. You hate the same person as Uluru, right?" Declaring that out loud drew a definite picture of the feelings inside her. She came to a clear realization about what she was trying to do, what she'd come here wanting to do.

"Sachiko didn't want her magic causing anyone misfortune. She was the biggest crybaby and a chicken, but she was thinking of other people. Uluru thinks Sachiko is a stupid idiot, but still, Sachiko is Uluru's little sister. Uluru wants to do what she would have wanted."

Snow White read minds. No matter what cheap tricks someone used to try to deceive her, no matter if they tried to babble on wildly in an attempt to confuse her, she would know everything. So you had no choice but to just say it all straight out.

"Uluru will help. So help out Uluru. We'll sneak you out."

The moment of silence between them wasn't that long—going by her internal clock, about a minute passed.

Snow White raised her arms, then swung them down to hop to her feet. She let out a long breath. "If you're sneaking me out, I think that will mean going against Puk Puck. Are you really okay doing that?"

"Lady Puk…" Uluru's voice went hoarse. "Lady Puk… This still doesn't change how much Uluru owes Lady Puk. But…Uluru…"

Uluru grabbed the corner of the credenza with her right hand. It was as if she was clinging to it.

"You're the one who's pushed me to do this, aren't you? And if I'm a magical girl, then you are, too." Snow White gently covered Uluru's hand, the one clasping the cabinet, with her own. She didn't squeeze it tightly. She just left it there. But there was heat. The energy warmed Uluru's hand, and Uluru's hand warmed hers in turn.

Uluru closed her eyes, then slowly opened them. She was still undecided. Thinking about her sisters, her whole life until now, Puk Puck, whom she'd always served as an absolute leader, and everything else connected to that, she felt confused and lost and she wanted to run away, but she held those feelings back to consider.

"…All right. Let's go. Uluru's gonna get her things and the estate master key. Right now, everyone's all crowded around certain spots, so if I pick out the right route, we should be able to get away, even taking you along." Though her voice was hoarse, she'd come to her answer.

Snow White nodded. "If we're going, then I want to make a request."

"What?"

"Bring me all my things that were confiscated, too. The bag, my weapon, and magical phone…since I need Fal most of all. They've put them away in a locker in warehouse three. When my things were taken from me, I heard the inner voice of the one who carried them away, so if they haven't been moved, they should still be there."

"Warehouse three, huh? There might be people there. You stay here. Uluru'll get them for you."

Snow White took a step back and bowed her head deeply. "Thank you."

Now Snow White was none other than the Snow White Uluru knew.

◇ Snow White

When she slowly raised her head, the door was already closed, and Uluru was gone. Listening to her footsteps and the voice of her heart grow distant, Snow White bit her lower lip. She was

essentially driving on someone recently bereaved by telling her to try harder, and she was about to make things even worse for her, all for the sake of accomplishing her own goal. This was who she was now—this was Snow White now. But this was not the time to run. She was not even going to laugh at Uluru's childlike idea of how pure, righteous, and beautiful magical girls supposedly were. Even if she wound up dying from choking on her own vomit, she would accept that she was a magical girl.

She was completely exhausted. It all felt fuzzy, she didn't want to do anything, and she didn't want to think anything. Just thinking about Ripple made her heart hurt like it was about to burst. But she had to do something. She realized that getting all that wind out of her lungs, yelling back and forth with Uluru, and their grabbing at each other had made her feel a little better.

There had been those who had kept the faith as magical girls, even when the situation spelled despair. Those people had remained concerned about others to the bitter end. La Pucelle, who had shown gentle consideration to Snow White, no matter what happened, even though she had to have been going through a hard time herself. Hardgore Alice, who'd said that as long as Snow White was there, magical girls would not have gone from that town. Princess Inferno, who had been thinking of her friends right up to the moment of her death, entrusting her desire to *beat the bad magical girls* to Snow White. Just how many times had she felt she wanted to be a magical girl who would not be ashamed to face them? It was the same now. She didn't want to turn her back on those girls.

Biting her lip until it was about to bleed, suddenly, she went slack. A shiver ran up her spine. She could hear the voice of a heart. One that loved and was concerned about the Magical Kingdom and magical girls more than anyone.

Puk Puck.

Her footsteps and voice drew nearer. She was almost there. Snow White tensed deep in her stomach. She remembered what that magical girl of the Osk Faction had said: "You can't look at her." The footsteps came to a stop, and a key was stuck in the lock, and the door opened. She was there. Puk Puck smiled at Snow White. Though she wasn't looking, for some reason, she could tell. With just that, she experienced the illusion of her body starting to melt away.

“Hello, Snowy Sis.”

Hearing her voice deepened that illusion even further.

“Puk didn’t want to lock you up in a place like this… Sorry, ’kay?”

That tilt of her head made Snow White clasp her chest. She couldn’t even speak.

“Snowy, you beat Grim Heart, right? Even Puk couldn’t beat her. That’s so amazing.”

The praise sank into her body, turning into pleasure and oozing in. It was trying to become feelings like, *I’m glad to receive her praise, I want to make her happy*. Snow White tore her eyes away from Puk Puck and looked at the ground.

“Puk thinks that if you are on our side, things are bound to work out. So come out for a trip with Puk. Hey, you don’t mind, right? The other girls’ll be with us, too, so it’s gonna be lots of fun. And you know Shadow Gale, she’ll be there, too, you know.”

Snow White’s chin was gradually rising. She couldn’t bear the pain of looking at the ground any longer. She knew that if she just lifted her face and looked ahead, she’d find something so beautiful she’d want to keep looking at it forever, so why did she have to keep her eyes on the boring stone floor?

“There are some girls who’re trying to get in the way of Puk using the device. Puk wishes Uluru could make the device go… Why’s she getting in the way? Using the device will make everyone happy, so Puk wants you to stop the girls who are getting in the way, Snowy.”

Snow White lifted her face and looked straight at Puk Puck. When she saw that smile, the horror in her heart settled, and she could feel herself relaxing. “Lady Puk.”

“What is it?”

“Please capture Uluru. She plans to escape here with me. I just asked her to go get my things. If we leave her be, she might cause harm.”

“Oh dear, so that’s what’s going on. But ’Luru isn’t very strong, so Puck figures it should be fine if we leave her be.”

“Please.”

“Hmm…okay. If you insist, then yeah. Puk’ll go ask everyone. Thanks for telling me, Snowy Sis.”

All at once, she was enveloped in happiness from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. She’d been useful to Puk Puck. There

was no greater happiness than this. Inside her head, the order of priorities swapped around, like cards being shuffled. First, there was Puk Puck. Her goal was to activate the device. And then there was the elimination of forces that were getting in the way of that.

"Lady Puk."

"What is it?"

"Please make me more useful."

"Yep, that's what Puk came for."

Snow White was thankful to Puk Puck, and she swore in her heart that she had to repay her as much as she could. "Lady Puk."

"Yes?"

"Where are my belongings? If I have those, I'll be able to serve you better, Lady Puk. And Fal is a capable mascot. He's sure to be useful to you."

"Yep, yep. You're very enthusiastic. Puk's happy, too. It really was a good idea to use magic on you, too, Snowy."

"…Thank you very much."

"Hmm?"

"For using your magic on me."

"Hee-hee. It's because you're important to Puk, Snowy Sis."

◇ Uluru

Uluru's hand was still warm and trembling after touching Snow White's. Maybe it was because she'd been facing Snow White and her piercing gaze, but her throat was dry, and it stung. But she couldn't run away or hide. She had separated from Puk Puck, who used to save her when things she didn't understand happened. Sorami was gone. Sachiko was gone, too.

Uluru had said to Snow White, *"You're a magical girl, so save her."* But Uluru was even more a magical girl than Snow White was. Sachiko and Sorami had both been magical girls, too. No—they still were. If there was someone in trouble, Uluru was going to save them, no matter what.

When she came out from the dungeon, she discovered the estate in chaos. She could hear voices saying things like, "Someone's here" and "Lady Puk's orders." Uluru slipped from shadow to shadow. Warehouse three wasn't that heavily secured. There was a lock on it, but that was all. In front of the warehouse, Uluru looked around,

right and left. There was nobody looking in her direction. Pulling the rifle off her back, she whacked the lock with it. With the first strike, it bent inward, with the second, it twisted, and with the third, the lock came apart. She grabbed the half-broken lock, twisted it from side to side, and tossed it on the ground. She opened the door and headed for the locker. The old locker in one corner of the room was also locked, but she destroyed that with the butt of her rifle in the same way to open it up. She picked up a familiar-looking bag, and when she peeked inside—

"What happened, pon? What's going on, pon?"

"You be quiet a sec. Uluru's about to go to Snow White…"

She heard footsteps coming. A lot of them. There was yelling, too; before she could think about what they meant by "Capture Uluru," she was on her feet and running. If she tried leaving this storehouse the way she'd come in, she wasn't going to make it. She headed for the window. Pulling a *naginata*-like weapon from her bag, she whacked the window lattice. The lattice flew open, sending shattered glass everywhere.

"It's Uluru! There she is!"

She could only assume they'd found out she was trying to escape from the estate—even though nobody should have known that, aside from Snow White.

The voices and footsteps were hot on Uluru's trail as she scrambled out the window, but the weapon in her hands caught on the sill. She let it go in a panic, and then her bag got caught on the window, spilling its contents outside the warehouse. Her panic peaking, Uluru scooped up the magical phone that was carping at her, "What are you doing, pon?" and ran. Her mind was hardly working; only her legs would obey. She felt like she had to keep running or she'd be crushed. Now she couldn't go back to where Snow White was, either. If she kept running around inside the estate, eventually she'd be captured. *Damn it. Crap*, she cursed in her head, blaming Sachiko and thinking, *It's your fault!*

Despite having a good-luck symbol, the four-leaf clover, as her motif, Sachiko always had such bad luck. When the three sisters had been together, generally Sachiko would make bad things happen. Then she'd bring herself to the verge of tears, and Sorami would console her, and Uluru would scold her.

It's 'cause you're gone, Sachiko, all the bad stuff is coming down on Uluru.

If Sachiko were here, if Sachiko were here—Uluru wiped her tears with her wrist. The smell of blood tickled her nose, and she remembered that earlier, in the dungeon, she'd wiped blood off her nose. It wasn't Sachiko's job to have everything bad foisted on her. The eldest of the three sisters, the one who had to protect everyone, was Uluru. Sachiko and Sorami were just supposed to help, to give her a hand.

Yeah. Give me a hand.

As the voices around got louder, she lowered her head, going from one bush to the next until she came out into the courtyard.

Sachiko, you were always so *unlucky. Why were you always crying, why, when you're supposed to be a lucky clover? So for today, at least, be a real good-luck clover. Can't you help Uluru just a little?*

Suddenly, she heard a voice. It wasn't Sachiko's. It wasn't Sorami's. It wasn't Puk Puck's, and it wasn't Snow White's, either. Uluru ran toward the voice. It wasn't one she'd heard before. It wasn't someone from the estate.

Searching for the source of the voice, she sped up. The front gates were slightly open. The gate guard magical girl's back was to her. Some visitor had arrived, and she was dealing with them. It wasn't enough of an opportunity to call an opportunity. Close to the front gates, she could see a bunch of magical girls, and if Uluru charged in, they would discover where she was. But Uluru thought that if she was going to take a gamble, then now was the time. Praying to Sachiko, *Give me some luck, I just need a bit*, she ran.

◇ Mana

Even after she finally arrived at her destination, yet another long and painful ordeal began.

"That's why I'm saying to let me investigate," said Mana.

"I cannot allow you in without Lady Puk's permission."

"So then why won't you go to get permission?"

"Because I cannot leave this post."

Ten minutes had passed just going back and forth like this. The magical girl who guarded the gates had this attitude like, *"You should be grateful I even opened it,"* and she showed no intention of listening to Mana.

"An employee of the Inspection Department called Snow White

should be visiting right now. We have physical documents of that in our records, and we've been in contact with her."

"Lady Puk has no knowledge of such matters."

"Is a magical girl called Shadow Gale here—?"

"I've heard nothing of the sort." The guard was addressing her from the incredibly rude position of through the slightly opened gate, showing only her face.

But despite her irritation, Mana kept talking, and though the guard clearly wanted to end the conversation, Mana persisted. She wasn't going to let this go. "If you can't leave your post, then call for someone else, please. You must have a magical phone or something."

"Unfortunately, I do not."

"That's ridiculous."

"You may call it ridiculous, but it's the truth."

Pfle's magical phone, through which she had been amusing herself babbling on and on pointlessly, now didn't so much as twitch. It was as if there had never been a peep from it to begin with. It seemed Pfle's promise of putting in a word for her as the chief of Magical Girl Resources only went as far as getting the gate guard to open up for her. The guard was driving Mana nuts on one end while Pfle was irritating her on the other, and she couldn't see any way out.

"If you insist you won't let me past, no matter what, then please bring Snow White here," said Mana.

"I cannot do that, either. This isn't even an official investigation in the first place, is it? Do you have a warrant?"

"Like I said—"

She heard a yell cutting her off from behind. The magical girl whipped around to look back toward the estate. Mana also tried to look toward the estate through the gap in the gate, and when the gate guard noticed that, she blocked the way in front of her so Mana couldn't see inside.

Mana pressed her, "What was that? What are you doing inside?"

"Whatever may be going on inside the estate, that's no reason for you to take us to task for it. We cannot have you peeking."

"No matter what you do, I can't take you to task for it? That's ridiculous! Even if she is an incarnation of one of the Three Sages, she still has to obey the laws of the Magical Kingdom, of this world

—”

Before Mana could finish, the magical girl fell toward her. With two people fully coming down on her, Mana barely caught herself as she was flung back toward the street. Though even saying that she caught herself, it was so sudden, the most she could do was protect the back of her head. She hit her back hard, squeezing out a voiceless yell, and then, after rolling over the ground a second time, she somehow got up on her knees.

The gate guard was trying to get to her feet. Three magical girls had appeared from inside the gates. Each of them had weapons—one a cutely decorated wand, one a strangely shaped sword. They were glaring toward Mana’s right. When Mana glanced over, she saw a magical girl there. She held what looked like a toy rifle, and her shoulders were heaving.

“Take her into custody,” came that same voice from her magical phone.

Mana moved as if her back had been pushed at just the right moment. Thrusting her arm out in front of the girl beside her, she said as loudly as she could, “How dare you engage in such violent behavior in front of an investigator! You’re going to tell me what’s going on here!”

It was only moments before the magical girls grew agitated. The trio looked at each other and nodded, and the gate guard stepped back as if she’d inferred she should. Mana sensed an uneasy feeling hanging in the air, thick, like it clung to the skin, and retreated half a step back. The magical girls raised their weapons again and split into three directions: right, left, and front, slowly forming a triangle. Mana slid one hand into her pocket, reaching for an ampule filled with liquid medicine, but before she could grab it, the three magical girls moved.

Mana was a mage. She couldn’t hope to be as fast as a magical girl. It was all over before she could even be surprised. That was how magical-girl fights went. The wand-wielding girl was knocked down, making an arc of cracks in the road. The sword-wielding girl made a dent in the wall, and the third had her limbs trapped in ice, her ankle bitten by a shadow-puppet dog that stretched over the road, pulling her to the ground.

“It’s the enemy! Over here!” the guard yelled into the gates. Immediately after that, a magical girl with a trident kicked her. The gate guard lowered both arms to block, but she was flung back into

the estate.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and fly!"

With the magical phone talking at her, Mana snapped out of it and started running, then grabbed the hand of the girl who was still standing beside her dumbly with her rifle. Mana practically yanked her arm off to pull her along and run. She opened up the door of her van, which was parked on the road, and tossed the girl inside. When she was getting into the driver's seat, she heard the sounds of gunfire and bullet impact in continuous succession, and she turned back. A magical girl in black, covered all over by something shadowlike, was turned away from her. One after another, magical girls were running out from inside the Puk estate to wield weapons against the black winged things—homunculi—that came attacking from the sky.

Mana didn't turn back again. She got into the van, turned on the engine, and floored the gas, accelerating like a rocket. Stray bullets skimmed the vehicle, but a van with the Inspection Department's spells on it wasn't going to break over something like that.

"Through an unexpected accident, we were able to obtain good results. Attacking a mage of the Inspection Department with the goal of silencing her is a most highly illegal act, a deed that shows she fears no one. Thanks to this, we now have a pretext. If we take this to the Osk Faction, they should be able to turn it into quite a nice justification for hostilities."

An "unexpected accident"—just how much of this did she mean was accidental? No matter how you thought about it, the two magical girls and countless homunculi that had popped out from somewhere when Mana was in trouble to come save her had been hired by Pfle. Even if Pfle hadn't anticipated that it would come to this, Mana was forced to assume she'd had her hires lurking in wait with the intention of having them engage in some violence. In other words, this happening was all according to plan. And she'd used Mana as her pawn, leading her right up to danger.

All she could hear from the back seat was rough panting. Mana was also panting, of course. Unable to complain to the magical phone or snap at Pfle with something sarcastic, she leaned against the wheel, bent forward as she stepped on the gas.

CHAPTER 3
LET'S MAKE MORE FRIENDS

◇ **Pfle**

"Hello, hello, I'm Pfle."

"Lethe."

"Hello, all, I'm Hamuel. These are Shufflin IIs: a two and three of hearts." The three magical girls each took seats.

Pfle smiled and turned to the window at her right. "Thank you very much for inviting me. What a wonderful room. The carpet is so soft, and the view is superb."

"Oh, not at all, it's very much an emergency temporary stronghold," said Hamuel. "It's exceedingly embarrassing that this is the only place we have to welcome you… But more pertinently, it would truly be most heartening if we could have the cooperation of the Magical Girl Resources Department."

"I'm very grateful you would say that of us."

"So? Pfle, you said, eh? I heard you brought me gifts," Lethe said.

Pfle nodded. "The first is not a gift based on my position, however. A certain inspector, upon hearing report from a good citizen that a magical girl had been kidnapped and confined in the Puk estate, went there to investigate. However, she reports that there, she was attacked by magical girls under Puk Puck's command. And she just barely managed to escape this dire situation."

"Oh-ho. A fine pretext…," said Lethe. "I mean, so she's been up to no good, eh?"

"Indeed," Hamuel agreed. "And she can't explain it away by saying her subordinates did it on their own. A proper investigation must be done, including on Puk Puck."

“Ensure that it’s arranged, eh.”

“Yes’m. However, after so foolishly attacking a mage of the Inspection Department and then allowing her escape, wouldn’t they have surmised that Inspection would be making a move on them? Though they might be somewhat unprepared, I would suggest the possibility that they may act before the authorities arrive.”

“This is Puk Puck,” Lethe pointed out. “No matter how much of a hurry she’s in, she spends an hour simply changing clothes, eh. Add in transportation time, that makes around two hours… So then deal with the legal procedures in accordance with precedent within thirty minutes, and send the Inspection Department to her estate. Be sure to seize everything that can be seized.”

“Yes’m. Then I’ll make the arrangements for that as well.”

As she listened to Lethe and Hamuel’s exchange, Pfle’s cheeks relaxed into a smile, and she clapped her hands. “What marvelous efficiency. So then perhaps we should also contact the ruins. It would be a good idea to firm up the defenses or gather soldiers or whatnot, wouldn’t it?”

“Ensure it’s done, Hamuel.”

“Yes’m.”

Pfle nodded and raised her right hand, sticking up her index and middle fingers. “And then the second item. I have some highly trustworthy information acquired through a certain channel. And it’s rather intriguing.”

“Intriguing, you say?” said Hamuel.

“I heard that activating the device will make Puk Puck become friends with all magical girls.”

“Friends?”

“Yes, friends. I would assume that includes those like ourselves —her enemies—among those who will become her friends, but I don’t know how. If I told you no more than this, it might sound like a simple joke. Perhaps it seems like nothing but the most ludicrous nonsense. But it bothers me. Though this is only hearsay, it’s strangely stuck with me. My impression is this runs deeper than a simple expression of Puk Puck’s idiosyncrasies. Being that you and your associates have information, you may be able to more precisely assess what it is the Puk Faction is truly attempting to do.”

“Mm-hmm,” said Lethe. “Hamuel, tell the research team—that Puk Puck is trying to become friends with all magical girls, eh.”

“Yes’m.”

“Well, though rather than being information from Magical Girl Resources, I might call this information from a source I just happened to know,” said Pfle. “In either case, I am nothing more than a messenger, so as it stands, I will not be able to take pride in having been useful… So I will employ some magical girls who work as mercenaries and take them along. While I’m sure this is obstruction from the Puk Faction, there are some groundless rumors going about that the Osk Faction is using magical girls as experimental subjects. And because of that, mercenary magical girls are not keen to side with the Osk Faction.”

Hamuel nodded gravely. “…That is indeed inconvenient.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I can do something about that on my end,” Pfle continued. “Since that’s a Magical Girl Resources issue, after all. I have already secured some magical girls with reliable backgrounds who I can assure you are not under Puk Puck’s influence. They are my subordinates. If need be, I shall lead them myself to join the battle. I would hope you won’t think of me as merely that frail girl from Magical Girl Resources. All of mine are worth a thousand fighters. I have a roster of them right here.”

“Thank you very much,” said Hamuel. “Then I’ll take a look right away… Um, this is…a magical girl who manifests shadows? And…a magical girl who wields a trident and…uses powers…of ice…huh.”

“They look strong, don’t they? Oh, they are in fact strong.”

“Oh, yes…I’m sure they are.”

“Hamuel,” said Lethe, “you look pale.”

“Not at all, oh no. I’m in quite perfect health. There are many things to discuss more important than my pallor. Many things, right?”

Pfle reached out over the table and picked up one milk-white chocolate. “May I have this chocolate?”

“Oh, yes, please, go right ahead.”

“Hmm, the flavor melts on the tongue. It’s been quite some time since I’ve had sweets. It goes so well with this tea.”

“Pfle,” said Lethe, “if you’re so willing to cooperate, you must be seeking recompense. In the first place, you… Hamuel, of which faction is she?”

“I have some sense that the head of Magical Girl Resources, for some generations, may have been of the Caspar Faction, or maybe

not," said Hamuel.

"Indeed," said Lethe. "In the case that we and the Caspar Faction were to cooperate, you would have taken this to the Caspars, going through the upper ranks to inform me of this, which would score points for the Caspar Faction as a whole. If you would go over their heads to contact me yourself, you must have some goal in mind, eh."

"Oh no," Pfle said, "though my department may be of that faction, it's not as if I have any sense of personal affiliation with them. I've received no gifts from them, and neither have I paid compensation to them, either. It's simply that over the generations, such affiliation has been assumed."

"So then do you mean to say," Lethe replied, "you would sever ties with the Caspars to follow the Osk Faction instead?"

"I'm not concerned with affiliations. The party presently taking the lead in the assault on the Puks is not the Caspars but the Osks, which is why I've brought this proposal to you. This is not seeking association for the sake of future stability. Rather, I mean to get along because there's something I want currently—that's my angle."

Lethe leveled an evaluating gaze at Pfle. "I shall listen."

"As I'm sure you are already aware, Puk Puck is gathering a large number of magical girls to use their magic to activate the device."

"You're very informed, eh."

"Thanks to my information sources. And among the magical girls captured by the Puk Faction is one called Shadow Gale. She has been ensorcelled by Puk Puck's magic and is being forced to cooperate, but she's my subordinate. I want her returned in one piece."

"Hmm. So the rescue of your subordinate is your first priority? What a fine leader."

"Oh yes…I fully agree," said Hamuel.

"What's wrong, Hamuel? Do you have something to say, eh?"

"No, nothing."

"I've been attempting to get her back," Pfle continued, "but it just hasn't been going well. I'm sure your antennae are longer, so I think you would also be aware how hard put we've been—haven't you?"

"Haven't you, Hamuel?"

"Oh…I couldn't say…"

“Well, then, no matter,” said Pfle. “Whatever the case, Shadow Gale’s safety is enough recompense. Though she is an important figure in this ceremony, I would ask that you not do anything like send an assassin to kill her or blow everything up, ruins and all. If you would put your oath into form, by promissory note or seal of blood, then let us cooperate. I’ll be counting on you.”

◇ Puk Puck

In the end, Uluru disappeared. It had been a bad idea to be considerate and let her rest for a bit after losing her sisters. That decision had led to the loss of a dear friend.

It wasn’t like there were no restrictions to Puk Puck’s magic ability to make friends. If she turned her powers up high, her magic would neglect others by an equal margin. There were so many other magical girls she wanted to be friends with, and because of that, she’d wound up splitting from Uluru. Puk Puck sighed in sadness and grief.

She’d been told that a mage from the Inspection Department had been present when Uluru had been trying to flee the estate. Puk Puck’s friends had attacked the mage in an attempt to get Uluru back, but they’d let her get away. Puk Puck had expressed her gratitude with a “Thanks, thanks!” to all the friends who had done their best, and she honestly was thankful to them, but now she had a problem. If the Osk Faction found out about Puk Puck’s friends having attacked a mage from Inspection, that would be giving them a pretext. They’d march right over to Puk Puck’s place, spouting a mix of fact and fiction, and try to get in the way of the ceremony. She couldn’t have that. She didn’t want that.

Puk Puck had discussed this with Snow White, who had said they should take action right away. Puk Puck had agreed, and then, figuring she’d take about an hour to get changed, she’d begun selecting clothes. Snow White had stopped her, saying she could just change in the car. Such a rude proposal had shocked Puk Puck a lot, but once she pictured it, it seemed fun and new, like an adventure. After a bit of waffling, Puk Puck accepted Snow White’s proposal.

When the truck turned the sixty-sixth corner after leaving the

estate, Puk Puck felt a lightness as if her body had suddenly disappeared. The scenery faded, blurring as if it were melting away, and the car navigation screen went all wonky, showing an error dialog. Her consciousness faded along with the scenery, and by the time she came to, they were driving through a completely different place. Puk Puck squeezed a fist and opened it again, checking again that she was indeed present. No matter how many times she experienced magical travel, she never got used to it.

She was somewhere entirely different now—almost like a new world. This place was like a microcosm created to transfer the device somewhere with no external threats in order to preserve it and the ruins around it forever and ever. Anything lovely or cute had been deemed useless and omitted, so it was desolate in every direction. Even aside from cute things, all else had been thought capable of "leading to danger that would harm the ruins," so there was truly nothing more than the necessary minimum in this world. There were no animals and no plants. Everything about it was contrary to Puk Puck's taste.

The trucks ran down a road that was practically untouched by the hands of man; it was like it had been carved straight out of the wasteland. There was nothing around save for the open landscape, and without the road, they would have just been going straight along without knowing which way to go. The speedometer indicated seventy-five miles an hour. Far ahead down this road were the ruins, and the device.

The ruins and their legacy, made by the First Mage, who might be called the god of the Magical Kingdom, were a national treasure, a gift from God. Their preservation and maintenance were things the Three Sages were *supposed* to take full responsibility for tackling together. However, considering what was happening next, that wasn't that important.

Presently, the ruins where the device lay were heavily guarded by the Osk Faction. In order to fight off those who would use the legacy left by the First Mage for ill, they had put up a magical barrier and built a great wall and gate, stationing plenty of skilled fighters and homunculi there. This made Puk Puck sad—now wasn't the time to be doing something like that. This wasn't the time for the Three Sages to be bickering among each other, but the Osks wouldn't listen to her. They just kept repeating like some schoolteacher, *"It's dangerous, so we can't."*

The time was coming when they would have to use it, even if it was dangerous. No matter how Puk Puck explained it, the Osk Faction wouldn't listen, and even the Caspar Faction, which had once voted in agreement, apparently had been offered a variety of payoffs by the Osks. Now the Caspars were starting to say that since it was so important, they wanted to have another meeting to discuss it. It was quite uncertain where the future was headed.

Puk Puck had cheered herself up, telling herself she couldn't be discouraged by this. She'd made up her mind that even if she wound up on her own, she had to do what she could for the Magical Kingdom's future. When she had shared her valiant determination with her friends, they'd all wept, and Puk Puck, who was kinder than anyone, neatly wiped away their tears with her soft and velvety magic handkerchief.

All eighteen trucks made their way onward in perfect order with no hiccups. Their load of shipping containers swaying, they approached their goal, and in about fifteen minutes, they stopped in front of the giant gates. Puk Puck agonized over what to change into, saying, "Should I go with this, or should I go with that?" before selecting a pure white robe. Its sleeves fluttered cutely as she stepped out alone from the truck at the head of the line. This robe was the Three Sages' formal wear.

Her friends, led by Snow White, were trying to follow, but she restrained them with a bright smile and strolled up to the gates. She looked right, left, and up, then looked ahead. Not a single tree grew in this vast wasteland, but there were two small mountains nestled together. Between them was a narrow ravine. The entrance to the ruins was beyond that ravine, but the way to the ravine was blocked by giant gates—firmly closed, as if trying to drive away Puk Puck and her friends.

That was a very sad thing. If the gates were indeed trying to drive her away, as if her enemies had no intention of getting along even without meeting her, then they couldn't become friends. That was a massive loss. All her friends said the same thing: Just thinking about a life where they didn't know Puk Puck made them feel heartsick. Even if they were enemies right now, she couldn't let them feel like that.

Puk Puck took one more step forward and raised her hands in front of her. "People inside the gates!"

The air shook.

“Hey, are you listening? This gate’s made so it’s controlled from the inside, right? So that means there’s people running it, right? Can’t you hear Puk’s voice?”

At the top of the gate, near the peak of the arch-shaped part, there was a camera. It was most likely used to look at any visitors before the people inside decided whether they would be allowed entry.

The air shook with greater intensity. Puk Puck stroked the surface of the gate with both hands, then put her right palm to her lips. Before you could even be startled, she had blown a kiss at the camera. “Come be friends with Puk.”

The shuddering burst. The gates swayed wildly.

Puk Puck looked right, left, up, and then ahead of her. Shuddering all the while, the massive gates slowly inched open, until eventually they were fully spread wide. Puk Puck’s smile was brilliant, brimming with gratitude and joy. “Thanks so much.”

Hurrying back to the lead truck with a skip in her step, she slid into the custom-made front passenger seat that had lots of fluffy cushions, pointing ahead to order, “Go!”

With a sincere joy from the bottom of her heart, the driver smiled and picked up her radio. “Lady Puk has opened the gates.”

“No, no, Puk made friends with the gatekeeper,” Puk told her.

“Pardon me. Lady Puk has made friends with the gatekeeper, and has had them open the gates from the inside. We will be passing through in order, from vehicle A. The region ahead is under the Osk Faction’s control. All personnel, operate just like in training. Good luck.”

The truck started off. Puk Puck turned on the stereo. A song she’d never heard before was playing.

“The world is full of things Puk’s never seen or heard. Even having the title of one of the Three Sages, there’s tons of stuff Puk doesn’t know. That’s what makes learning so fun. There’s joy in making new friends. Right?”

Snow White nodded, and Puk Puck slipped her small, cute little hand into Snow White’s palm and squeezed it. Snow White was momentarily stunned before she hesitantly and timidly, with slowly increasing strength, squeezed back.

Puk Puck opened the window and leaned out.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” asked Snow White.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. You’re holding my hand, Snowy Sis.”

Puk Puck whistled along to that song she didn't know—it was chipper and up-tempo, just perfect for Puk Puck at that moment—as she gazed at the scenery. The desolate ravine bottom of rocks and boulders and nothing else, the large trucks driving on through it in a line while stirring up dust, everything about this would usually be not at all to her taste, but right now she was unbearably happy about it.

"Puk's come here a bunch of times before, you know," Puk said.

"Yes."

"But Puk's never been as happy about it as right now."

With dust billowing behind it, her truck drove onward, crushing rocks as it turned. It turned again, never slowing its speed of seventy-five miles per hour as it approached its goal with flawless control.

They came to an open space that looked as if it had been made by carving out the steep mountains around it. This basin-like spot was a few kilometers across, and on the other side, there was a hole in the rock face. That was the entrance to the ruins, and inside there was the device.

A bunch of magical girls were running through the basin, yelling as they approached. The truck raced forward, ignoring them, and the yelling girls jumped aside to avoid the truck—they were trying to do something to the vehicle, but right as they passed by, their eyes met with Puk Puck's, and they got these befuddled smiles on their faces and dropped their weapons, then just watched the truck go.

Coming up to the entrance to the ruins, the truck braked, making a long slide sideways, sending up billowing clouds of dust and digging deep tire tracks to come to a stop. The trucks behind it came to a halt in the same way, until the second-to-last truck got its tires caught in the ruts and rolled, which made the last truck lose control. It toppled on its side, making such a loud and frightening sound that Puk Puck pulled a face and shouted, “Wahhh!” But she quickly recovered her former smile.

Puk Puck and Snow White opened the door and got out of the truck, while the driver also stepped out from the opposite door to attend at Puk’s side. The magical girls in the trucks behind them also left their vehicles, opening up the shipping containers on the trucks one after another, while more girls swarmed out from within the boxes. Magical girls crawled out from the drivers’ seats of the two fallen trucks as well—the shipping containers were warped, and the girls inside couldn’t get out, so they whacked and thumped at them a bunch of times from the inside until they managed to kick them open to get out. Some were bleeding, or dragging a leg, or looked like they were in pain, but they were all in one piece. Everyone had managed to arrive there safely. Normally, some girls would probably be crying, but on that day, Puk Puck was lavishing far more love than usual on each and every one of them. None of the girls here were so weak that they would cry from just a broken bone.

Cupping her hands around her mouth, Puk Puck called out in a big loud voice, “Thanks for coming all this way, guys!”

The magical girls clenched their hands into fists and thrust them skyward in unison. A cry of “Wooo!” echoed through the ravine.

“And Puk’s gonna be counting on you guys from here on out, too!”

The united cry rang out one more time, and then the magical girls hurriedly put on gas masks, and, with Puk Puck in the lead, they scurried away into the ruins.

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

Hamuel had thought the trucks were for carrying the items they

were selling off. But they had packed combat personnel in together with the luggage, and while the Osk Faction had been busy pulling strings in an attempt to drag out negotiations, the Puk Faction had taken advantage of their distraction to attack the gem sellers instead. Then, after stealing the gems, the Puks hadn't waited even a second to attack the ruins, with their leader Puk Puck taking command at the head of her forces. She had charmed the gate guard through the camera to make her open it, then blasted her way through the defense unit. The ones who had died in that fight had been the lucky ones—reports said all the survivors were following Puk Puck now. The ruins had been completely taken over.

Hamuel heard the report at her hotel.

Negative thoughts in the vein of *We've been had, it's too late* spun around in her head, and eventually she shot her arm out to punch the table, but she just barely restrained her fist. She was surprised she still had enough sense to recognize that if she hit the table with magical-girl strength, she'd easily destroy it. That did help her calm down a little.

When she snapped out of it and looked ahead, she saw Lethe sitting there in an unusually slouched position, lips twisted as she leaned her full weight on the arm of the sofa. Plainly put, she seemed like she was in a very bad mood.

"You are not to show your anger in front of an aristocrat. You understand?" said Lethe.

"Yes, of course, my lady," Hamuel replied. "Pardon my rudeness."

"You understand what you must do, eh?"

The two of them faced one another in silence for a while. The heart Shufflin II attending behind Lethe shifted her gaze back and forth between them with a terribly frightened expression. Hamuel would have preferred to look away, but she couldn't do that. Lethe was ordering her to come up with a plan to deal with this.

"We should hurry to the ruins," Hamuel said finally. "Even if they have taken control of them, it's not as if they'll finish the ceremony and reactivate the device right away."

"Oh-ho, oh-ho. Anything else?"

"Let's make a serious matter of this, far beyond her subordinates attacking personnel from Inspection. Now we have just cause. It has been the Osk Faction's mission to defend the ruins. But now an attack has been launched on them, a de facto takeover by

force committed by the Puk Faction—rather, by Puk Puck herself. Our enemy is acting unlawfully, and so we will be the ones to defend the law. Public Security Enforcement, the Demonslaying Division, or the agents from General Staff Section Zero, any of them will do—we just need to appeal to the Central Authority, saying, *'Puk Puck has become deranged, send whatever forces you can.'* If we take it that far, even if Puk Puck is leading the sortie herself, she won't be able to handle our superior forces."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Anything else?"

"However, it would take too much time to wait for these forces to gather before taking action. I would arrange it so that we obstruct the ceremony while simultaneously striking them with our gathered forces. We take the military strength we can assemble now and go straight to the ruins. Since their side has an incarnation of one of the Three Sages, having someone to act as our banner will boost morale, and should also be a significant functional boost to our combat might. Even if they've gathered a hundred strong magical girls and a thousand combat-use homunculi, they are no match for the greatest warrior of the Osk Faction, Lethe, and everyone will know that."

"You would have me go out on the front lines?" said Lethe.

"Only if you're not opposed, my lady."

"Do you think I can fight Puk…a Sage incarnation?"

"If you cannot fight her, then I will make sure to manage the situation appropriately."

Lethe merely gave Hamuel a fixed look. Hamuel did not say anything to fill the silence or prompt her to speak, either. Hamuel thought back on what Lethe had just said. Lethe had kept prompting her for more and more, so with the thought *I have to say something*, she'd kept adding further remarks, but she did admittedly get the feeling that she'd said too much for her station. Actually, she figured she'd definitely said too much. Especially that part about going out onto the front lines and whatnot.

Whether she was aware of Hamuel's stomachache or not, Lethe slowly began to speak. "In the main…"

"Yes?"

"That's about what I was thinking, eh."

"Pardon?"

Lethe rose to her feet, and her attending Shufflin II immediately draped a cape over her shoulders and lifted up the skirts of her

dress so that they wouldn't touch the floor. Since one alone couldn't carry it all, a heart Shufflin II also leaped out from where she'd been in waiting, and each of them held one corner of her skirts.

"Well then, let's go, eh?"

"Oh, yes, my lady."

Hamuel came up in front of Lethe to lead her to the elevator. She most certainly had a skeptical expression on her face, but fortunately, that couldn't be seen from behind, so it wouldn't be a problem no matter what kind of look she had.

"That was fast," said Lethe.

"Huh?"

"The Puk Faction. They've been lightning fast."

"Oh, indeed. Perhaps she didn't need time to get changed." After saying that, Hamuel realized that this sounded like she was blaming Lethe, and she cleared her throat to cover it. Lethe gave no indication that she'd taken this remark as sarcastic or spiteful, and Hamuel was relieved about that. But then seeing that Lethe seemed to be deep in thought, Hamuel looked over to the display indicating the floor they were on. They were still only about halfway down.

"That estate is Puk's playground," said Lethe, "where she amuses herself playing king of the hill. Even if she would waste time changing clothes, I doubt anyone there could voice complaints about it… I wonder what's amiss, eh?"

"Perhaps she's had a change of heart."

"Sage incarnations never experience a change of heart."

"Is that so…? Oh yes, then shall we notify Pfle as well?"

"I'm sure she's learned about this anyhow, even without notification from us. She has a keen nose. She's got that sort of look to her."

◇ Mana

Mana had somehow managed to escape from the magical girls at the Puk Puck estate. Going back the way she'd come, upon returning to the Inspection Department Headquarters, she'd found Pfle gone. According to HQ, some magical girl from the Osk Faction had called to say Pfle had gone elsewhere. This was now beyond the issue of Pfle being a suspect or handing herself in.

Not only that, but things were also heading in the most

unthinkable direction. The Inspection Department explained that the Puk Faction had launched a sudden attack on the ruins where the device the First Mage had supposedly made was enshrined. The situation was no longer under the jurisdiction of the Inspection Department—they were basically like neighborhood police. You needed the military. But Mana wasn't going to abandon the job now. So she'd decided to take on a new mission that was fundamentally out of her league—to rush to the scene as a representative of the Inspection Department.

She sent the van that had gotten hit in the firefight to maintenance and procured a new one. Uluru followed her, sliding into the back seat, while Mana tossed her magical phone, left switched on, over onto the front passenger seat.

"Why'd you save Uluru?" Uluru asked them.

"You seemed to be in quite the pinch," Pfle replied over the phone, "so on the spur of the moment, you know."

"Hmm."

The magical girl with the toy rifle on her back had introduced herself as Uluru. She said that she'd served Puk Puck, but now she was being chased for some reason. But when Mana had asked, "So then you mean you've basically switched sides on your own?" Uluru had become absolutely incensed, taking a swing at Mana, heedless of the fact that she was driving.

So Mana had decided to take a different angle when questioning her about the situation. "You said you were being chased for some reason—why don't you know the reason?"

"It was probably because Uluru was trying to get out of the estate with Snow White… But no one else should know about that, except for Snow White. And there's no way she would tell anyone about Uluru."

"You were trying to take Snow White and get out of the estate? Why?"

"You just keep asking *why, why*!"

"Because you keep saying things that don't make sense!"

"Uluru hasn't said anything that doesn't make sense! Uluru made a promise with Snow White to get the bad guys! That's all!"

No matter what this girl said, Mana didn't really get what she was on about.

It seemed her connection with Snow White was that they'd done a job together. At a glance, Uluru had a very bad temper and

didn't seem like a good liar, but that didn't necessarily mean everything she said was true. If she was an extremely transparent spy sent by Puk Puck, then it would be quickly exposed what she was doing.

And when Mana said as much, Uluru got even angrier. She started throwing a tantrum in the back seat, but Pfle somehow managed to talk her down from it over the magical phone.

Seems I better avoid talking to this girl, Mana thought. Mana and Pfle didn't get along for different reasons.

In the rearview mirror, she saw Uluru scowling as she was listening to Pfle.

"Fal thinks you can trust what Uluru's saying, pon," the cyber fairy came in to back up Uluru from Snow White's magical phone. "Uluru's magic is to make people believe her lies, pon."

Deep wrinkles creased in between Mana's eyes. "So then she's not worth trusting."

"It's the opposite, pon. If you think she's not worth trusting, that means you can trust her, pon."

Mana didn't trust a single hair on Pfle's head. And she obviously didn't trust Uluru, whom she had only just met. Compared to the two of them, she had a decent amount of trust in Fal. Fal supported the Magical-Girl Hunter as a mascot of the Inspection Department. Rumor said Snow White couldn't have become who she was without Fal's efforts. Mana had also heard that Fal was so passionate about magical girls, if you brought up the subject, he would respond with about ten times as much as you wanted to hear. As a colleague, Mana felt she might as well trust what Fal had to say.

"I see," said Pfle. "Her lying would activate her magic. And if her magic were activated, then you would believe her. So then if Miss Mana does not believe her, that means she's not lying. How ironic, for a magic to tell lies to guarantee she tells the truth."

Pfle laughed from the magical phone, and Uluru responded with misdirected anger, saying "Don't laugh at Uluru!" so Mana forcibly took control of the conversation. If she let these people babble on as they pleased, there was no telling where this would go.

"More importantly," Mana interrupted, "what do you plan to do now?"

"I'm operating in the company of the Osk Faction. I'm on my

way to the ruins where the device is supposed to be. You all come, too. Let's meet up."

"It sounds like you've been acting as you please. Do you understand your own position here?"

"This is an emergency."

Mana made a point of slamming the brakes at the next traffic light, and the magical phone sitting on the front passenger seat crashed to the floor.

◇ Princess Deluge

After fighting off the magical girls of the Puk Faction and making it back safely, Deluge was relieved to hear from Pfle that they'd established an alliance with the Osk Faction. And then she questioned her relief. Just what was she feeling so relieved about? The Osk Faction was the enemy.

Her instructions from Pfle were to use the pass that had been issued to her as an employee of the Magical Girl Resources Department and head to the ruins. Pfle had said there would be a clash between the Osk and Puk Factions, and that Pfle was personally rushing over, so they would be meeting up there.

Deluge turned off her magical phone and passed on the orders to Dark Cutie, Glassianne, and Bluebell. Dark Cutie nodded, Glassianne looked very unhappy about it, and Bluebell had this look like she was ready to fall over any minute as she asked, "Do you need a candy?" That reminded Deluge that so much had been going on, she hadn't been sucking on those candies the whole time. She waffled for a bit, then shook her head.

At this stage, they'd just be waiting for Pfle's next call. The roof of the high-rise building where they were on standby was slightly chilly.

She pulled out her pill case and dropped a pill into her palm. She rolled it around in her hand, but eventually put it back into the case. Though she had to keep taking these pills in order to maintain magical-girl form, for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to take them proactively.

She wasn't engaged in any intense action like combat, so there was no need to consume large amounts of the drug. She only had a limited number of pills, so it was best to make them last as long as

possible. Her eyes dropped to the pill case. She'd known ever since she'd stolen them from the R&D Department that she had a limited number. Then why had she been taking them like candy until the day before? It was true there had been situations where she should be using them. But she also felt that, even outside of such situations, she'd taken a bigger dose than necessary. She'd heard that from the one who'd been giving her directions—and who was that anyway? Deluge had never questioned just who it was giving her instruction after instruction via those slips of paper, even as she'd taken action based on the information they provided, raging, resenting, and suffering all the while. Who on earth was it? There couldn't be all that many people in a position to acquire that kind of information. What was the reason they had only ever given her instructions, without ever showing themselves to her?

Deluge and Dark Cutie exchanged looks.

"Five-minute break," said Dark Cutie.

What had she thought, looking at Deluge? Or had she not thought anything? Dark Cutie leaned against the wall of the building, switching on her magical phone. An anime song played from it—something from the *Cutie Healer* series, maybe? Vibrant animation was dimly reflected in Dark Cutie's black eyes.

"Ahh, we can finally take a break, huh?" Glassianne stretched wide, and, still with her glasses on, she sank down to the ground. Bluebell let out a deep, deep sigh and leaned against the iron fence.

Folding her arms, Deluge leaned against the wall opposite Dark Cutie. She decided to take another close look at the thoughts that had risen in her mind. She had indeed been relieved to hear that they would form a united front with the Osk Faction. When she analyzed just what she was relieved about, and how, she found it was that this would enable them to swiftly launch an attack against the Puk Faction.

Armor Arlie, Blade Brenda, and Cannon Catherine were the three magical girls who had been captured by the Puk Faction. Deluge wanted to save them. Partly because she felt indebted for having made them go along with her revenge plan and guilty about having used them to her ends—but more than that, scene after scene of everything that had led up to now bubbled up in her mind. The memories were from that span of a few days when she'd been holed up in the hideout after attacking the R&D Department lab. She'd tried to see if she could practice fighting in the underground

room there, but trying to do it like she'd once done in the Pure Elements' lab had been a bad idea. Seeing the building start to collapse and Deluge panicking, the black armor had rattled away. Deluge had realized that she was laughing—she'd found it funny. Arlie had liked to put an egg into an economy-size consommé soup, and when Deluge had said, "But magical girls don't need to eat," she'd shaken her head no. All those sorts of small, trivial memories made since she'd left the research facility kept rising in her mind.

Deluge slowly shook her head.

This was sentimentality. She had shared so many countless small memories with her old friends, the Pure Elements, and now she was projecting them onto Arlie and the others. Deluge had fought against Snow White. She'd attacked the R&D Department, and she'd kidnapped Shadow Gale. In the process, she'd killed that cop-styled magical girl. She'd also killed many of the playing cards. She knew there was no going back now, so what point was there in continuing to cling to old memories?

Deluge gazed up at the sky with its countless twinkling stars.

Should she be doing something like this? At the very least, she still hadn't settled the score. She couldn't drop everything now.

Pulling her gaze away from the sky, she looked back to the building roof to find Dark Cutie's face just a foot away from hers, and she reflexively stepped back. All that was behind her was the building wall, so she smacked the back of her head and let out a little moan.

"You all right?" Dark Cutie asked.

"…I'm fine," Deluge replied.

Dark Cutie turned to Glassianne and Bluebell and said, "Five minutes have passed. Break's over." Glassianne booed and Bluebell sighed, but both of them got up.

When Deluge thought about the situation calmly, she could understand quite clearly that Pfle was using her to her ends. Deluge could tell that Pfle was just saying they were putting up a united front as she pulled wild moves of her own accord, then tried to pull the wool over their eyes about it while she benefited from the results. As long as she got back Shadow Gale, Pfle would see Deluge as nothing more than a kidnapper. Pfle could offer up whatever charges she liked to the authorities, or order Dark Cutie to quietly get rid of her—no matter what happened to Deluge, it wouldn't even be a prickle on her conscience. Deluge was the same. Pfle was

the most dubious person here, and Deluge had no intention of following her lead and operating purely for her benefit. She was going to save Armor Arlie and the others, and get back Shadow Gale, and use Pfle every step of the way.

Deluge squeezed her eyes tight, then opened them.

She would make her goal clear. In order to use Pfle, she needed the thing that bound her—Shadow Gale. Even if they were fighting on the same side now, Deluge couldn't forget that she and Pfle would be parting ways at some point. Deluge would be the one to get hold of Shadow Gale in the end. She would use Shadow Gale to manipulate Pfle and get revenge on the Osk Faction, which had killed her friends. To that end, first she had to beat the Puk Faction, so there was no helping that, right now, she had to use the Osks. She'd beat the Puks and retrieve Shadow Gale, then take back Armor Arlie and the others. All these things were necessary in order to accomplish her goals.

"Let's go," Deluge called, and in response, the Demon Wings that had been hiding in the shadow of the building appeared in a rustling swarm, grabbing the magical girls with their black arms to fly up into the air.

◇ Shadow Gale

Shadow Gale walked behind Puk Puck through the corridor of the ruins they had gained control of through a blitzkrieg strategy by elite soldiers of the Puk Faction. She could smell earth, blood, and fire. The sound of things burning, screams, and shattering reverberated through her feet. As the two of them passed by someone bleeding, someone collapsing, someone moaning, chaos all around them, Shadow Gale was engulfed in happiness.

Puk Puck was there, walking ahead of her.

When they saw Puk Puck, those magical girls who were bleeding as they were being treated, those who were wrapping the bandages, and even the homunculi curled up in the corners of the room all smiled happily, and when they saw Shadow Gale and the others walking behind her, their faces twisted in envy.

Shadow Gale puffed out her chest with pride. The others with them walked with their heads held high. They were now in the center of the world. From all over, they heard ripples of voices

saying, “Lady Puk,” “Ahh, Lady Puk!” “She’s so beautiful,” “She’s so adorable,” “I could do anything for her!” They trembled with the joy of being able to serve closest to Lady Puk, on the verge of tears, even.

When Puk Puck walked by the wounded, she stopped by each one, squatting down to place her hands on their injuries and say, “Pain, pain, go away!” to cheer them, and those who had been blessed with her touch hung their heads in gratitude before the first-aid team dragged them off for treatment.

The wounded were carried away, and the ugly stone passage was decorated to Puk Puck’s tastes. It was filled with stuffed animals and decorated with flowers and hung with paintings and lined with expensive-looking antiques. These were some of the effects that had been brought here along with Shadow Gale and the rest. The girls sprayed perfume to dissipate the stench of blood. Jester-like magical girls danced and scattered flowers in Puk Puck’s path. Puk Puck was all smiles as she walked over the flowers, and those magical girls who were working thoughtlessly paused in their tasks with dazed expressions, entranced by Puk Puck’s beaming visage. They didn’t return to their tasks until after Puk Puck passed by.

All was for Puk Puck’s sake. The world was for Puk Puck’s sake. Those who didn’t know that, who didn’t even try to know that, meant to hurt Puk Puck. If they just got to know Puk Puck, they could never think about getting in her way, but the people against her were attacking without any thought to their own ignorance. Puk Puck hated to fight, but she had no choice but to resist those who opposed her, even as she spilled beautiful tears.

However, even enemies would change if they came into contact with Puk Puck. The survivors of the guard that had been protecting these ruins had, in fact, without exception, sworn loyalty to her, and were working their hardest in order to make up for their wrongdoing and cleanse themselves of that dishonor.

Puk Puck would change people. Shadow Gale had also been a selfish, willful magical girl who had only ever thought about herself. There had been no value in her life at all. She’d only ever used her magic powers for herself. She shuddered to think about her life if she hadn’t met Puk Puck. And she thanked God—that is, Puk Puck—for the fortune of having been able to meet her.

The party walked on down the stone hallway that was being

brilliantly decorated. Whether the path branched into two or three, Puk Puck moved on without hesitation, until eventually they came out to a wide cavern. The ceiling was between sixty and eighty feet high. The width and depth had to be three times that.

Puk Puck strolled up in front of everyone and spread her arms wide, pointing to the back of the sanctum. “Ta-dada-daaa! So? Amazing, right?”

It was a massive…something. At a glance, it looked like an enormous upside-down egg. It was like metal, but also like clay. It looked as if cords extended from it, but also as if vines were tangled around it. Its large mass was many times greater than the height of a human, and it was supported by four long, thin legs that seemed as if they would snap off under its weight.

“Puk’s master left this behind.” Puk Puck walked ahead casually, and the other magical girls followed her a beat later. Deep down, Shadow Gale didn’t want to approach this thing she didn’t really understand, but if Puk Puck was going, then she couldn’t fail to follow.

As she got closer, her impression changed. What had seemed to be an inorganic object started seeming obviously organic, and its previously clear existence now seemed to blur. It was soft but also hard, square but also round. Despite having seemed to be a perfect square, it became a circle, and while being a circle it became a square and also a triangle. Shadow Gale stopped staring up at the thing, looking at her feet as she walked. She felt nauseated. She realized that *thing* there was something that must not be approached. If not for Puk Puck’s presence nearby, she would have run away.

After walking for an unknown time, Puk Puck touched her hand to the leg of the thing with a soft tap. Though Shadow Gale thought it was something that shouldn’t be touched, Puk Puck just gently laying her hand on it made a surprisingly perfect picture. It felt right. Shadow Gale got the feeling that this thing had been for Puk Puck since the time it had been made.

“You know, Puk thinks Puk’s master left this for us to use when we were in trouble. You guys all agree, right?”

Shadow Gale and the rest all nodded in unison. If Puk Puck said so, it had to be true.

Puk Puck nodded back with a satisfied smile. “Right now, we’re in big trouble. And that’s ’cause the Magical Kingdom has way less

magical power now. If we keep using magic as we always have, then it might all be gone soon. If we try to make it last, we might be able to manage, but then magical technology won't develop anymore. And that's a very sad thing."

Shadow Gale and the others nodded morosely. Puk Puck being sad made them sad.

"But it's okay. That's what this is for." Puk Puck bent her index finger and rapped twice on the thing with her second joint. The sound it made was both soft and loud, high and low, something Shadow Gale had never heard before.

"We're gonna modify this device and make it so we can put *aaaall* magical girls inside. You'll all melt up gooey and become one, and bit by bit, we'll be able to create magical power. But even if it is just bit by bit, if we get a whole bunch of girls in there, we'll be able to create a whole bunch of magical power, so it's okay. If you've got friends, you won't be lonely in here, so you don't have to worry, right?"

Drawn by Puk Puck's smile, Shadow Gale and the rest of the group wore enchanted smiles themselves as they nodded.

"If you enter in order, then it'll make it so we can put in all the magical girls in the world. Since based on the calculations, you need that much, or it won't be enough. Puk will watch over all magical-girl friends from outside the device. And Puk won't be lonely about staying behind, either."

That was good. Shadow Gale breathed a sigh of relief that she could be at ease.

"Originally, this device was made to take in magical power bit by bit from the air, and then, over a long, loooong time, make it into crystals. Making power real quick using magical girls isn't the normal way to do it. So we have to modify it, but we can't do the modification when it's like this. Puk's master sealed the device away so that bad guys can't use it for bad things. Normally, it'd be impossible to undo the seal, so nobody's been able to use it, and it's been left here all this time."

Puk Puck's gaze slowly swept over each of the girls' faces. "You guys' job is to make it so this device can be used. Everyone do your best to make the machine work, 'kay? With all your magic powers, I'm sure you can do it! Puk's gathered up all the best of the best, after all. Even an unsolvable code'll be a piece of cake for you."

Puk Puck put one of her hands on top of the other and thrust

them both out in front of her. Quite automatically, Shadow Gale and the other girls put out their hands on top of hers. The warmth of Puk Puck's hands lit the light of courage in their hearts. It made them feel like even this massive undertaking on which depended the fate of the Magical Kingdom was a feat they were sure to pull off.

"Let's do our best! Wooo!"

"Woo!"

"Let's go!"

"Let's do it!"

"We'll pull this off!"

"I just know we can do it!"

They all called out completely different things. Then they all looked at each other and laughed out loud.

CHAPTER 4
THE QUEENS' PLAYGROUND

◇ **CQ Angel Hamuel**

Two mountains side by side soared up in front of her, and through that ravine bottom, sandwiched between the stark cliff faces, was the road that led to the ruins. A massive gate—currently fallen into the hands of the Puk Faction—protected the entrance to that road. From the top of a small rise that was so slight you couldn't even call it a hill, where Hamuel was, she could see out over the gate that protected the ravine, and the whole wasteland that lay before it.

As a position to lay their forces' camp, it wasn't a bad one. It was just over six miles to the gate. You couldn't say for sure that was a safe distance—that depended on the magic—but going even farther back would make it difficult to get a grasp of the wasteland as a whole, which Hamuel anticipated would be the main battlefield.

Hamuel ordered the diamond Shufflin IIs to promptly construct some special seats for their most distinguished guests. Lethe was sitting as arrogantly as always, but since this was improvised seating, all they had was plastic folding chairs. But even in the deprived environment of the wasteland, on a plastic chair in a tent made of tarps and iron pipes, Lethe was indomitably continuing to act the aristocrat, making herself less "noble," instead generating the silliness of a clown who imitates nobility.

Unlike the spades and the clubs, who were fully alert and watching the gate area, the diamond Shufflin IIs were engaged in various activities: analyzing sand-covered magical phones and exchanging business cards and such with magical girls of various departments that the Osks didn't usually engage with.

Mages and magical girls gathered around the VIP seating, away

from any combat. Upon learning of the Puk Faction's violent acts, these men and women had immediately offered their cooperation in subduing them, and their presence was appreciated. Their support took many forms: Some had provided magical weapons, funds, or magical gems for the war effort, and some important figures had come straight over in person. Even if all someone offered was their name, it was meaningful just to be able to proudly say, *"Justice is on our side."* Since Hamuel had used her magic to go around informing every office of the situation, the more quick-witted types had acted with lightning speed. Even if sentiments toward the Osk Faction had chilled since Grim Heart's blunder, compared to the Puk Faction, with its leader immediately and presently leading her forces into criminal acts, the Osk Faction could be described as a worthwhile cause.

A revolving door of people came to bow their heads to Lethe, squeeze her hand, and make requests to the effect of, *"We'll be offering our aid, so once matters have been resolved, we beg your best regards."* It was just like having their old influence back, but nevertheless, they couldn't let their guards down. Puk Puck and her allies would have known full well before committing to this that it would make them criminals, and if they were going through with this anyway, it meant she was prepared to go as far as she wanted to go.

Lethe must have had her own thoughts on the matter as well, as she dealt with their new allies in a perfunctory manner. Though that forced Hamuel to bow her head ingratiatingly that much harder—there were no few bureaus that seemed to think that if they just sent over some important people, that would communicate their enthusiastic cooperation—it wasn't as if that fully occupied all her time.

Lethe was beneath a sunshade, two heart Shufflin IIs waving fans to cool her off. Even that must not have been enough, as she held another fan in her right hand to fan her face. Her left hand never left her opera glasses, eyes pointed toward the giant gate.

The imposing appearance of the gate showed that it was there to stop intrusion. The gate and walls that barred the entrance to the ravine and prevented the entrance of outside enemies were easily over a hundred yards tall, and they made any who saw them lose the urge to try climbing them. They were so incredibly large, they made the great rows of boulders before the gate—which had to be

about three times the size of a person—look like pebbles. But they protected ruins of such a ridiculous scale that a whole village would fit into them, so their size was appropriate.

"Then we're ready, eh?" Lethe confirmed with Hamuel.

"Yes, though only to the degree currently possible."

Three hours had passed since the ruins had been attacked by the Puk Faction. If you were only thinking about their aim of preventing the device's activation, three hours was a very long time, but as a length of time taken to gather combat forces to suppress the enemy, it was too short.

"Then open the gate," Lethe ordered.

"Yes'm."

The Osk Faction had been the ones to control these ruins, the establishment of the gates included. They could not only open and close the gates from the inside; it was also well within their power to operate them from the outside. Hamuel gave the order from her communicator, and with a heavy sound and a shuddering that could be felt all the way at her position, the gate slowly opened. Their guests applauded and commended them and expressed amazement as casually as if they were at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for an amusement park. There was no sense of tension at all. Despite her waning motivation and energy, Hamuel kept her mic at the ready as she focused her gaze on the gates.

They're here!

Once the gates were open just wide enough that one person might or might not be able to get through, someone slipped out from the inside. One, two more followed, and, swaying from side to side or weaving around, about a dozen magical girls emerged from within the gates. They appeared vague as silhouettes and couldn't be clearly made out.

Examining them through her opera glasses, Lethe snorted. "Dummies, eh. Illusions created by magic. Throw rocks or something at them."

"Ahh, throw some rocks at those blurry-looking figures," Hamuel ordered the Shufflins.

"There's some invisible ones coming up behind them. Doubtless those are the true targets." The opera glasses Lethe used were custom-made, brought out from the Osk Faction treasure house. Whether the enemy was invisible, camouflaged, or concealed, they would see through it all.

Hamuel relayed Lethe's instructions through her communicator. "There are invisible enemies coming up behind, so, clubs, attack them."

With rocks being thrown at them from all directions, the magical-girl silhouettes crumbled away, and the club Shufflin IIs raised their weapons to charge what lay behind the silhouettes. The clubs had better hearing than the other Shufflin IIs to keep track of their fellows, even while operating covertly. Even when they just swung based on intuition, since there were a lot of them, they were not a force to underestimate.

When Puk's magical girls removed their invisibility cloak and made to strike back against the unit of clubs, Lethe gave further instructions. "Send in the spade face cards."

"Right, then, jack, queen, and king of spades, go," said Hamuel.

"And ensure the diamonds are supporting them from the fringes, eh."

"All diamonds, are you ready?"

Each and every one of the Shufflin IIs, even the lower numbers, was an elite soldier. Furthermore, Hamuel was watching the battle in real time, and capable of flexible, situational command with practically no lag. *And* she had thirty units. With all of this at her disposal, of course their forces were not weak, they were in fact strong, but the enemy was also quite formidable, and they couldn't quite overcome it. A unit composed of a few Shufflins attacked one magical girl together, but the enemy skillfully evaded them, keeping the Shufflins' attacks from focusing on her and diverting them around her.

Suddenly, black clouds welled up, and lightning struck, aiming for the supporting diamonds at the rear in a succession of cracks that made you want to plug your ears. The next moment, a torrent of water washed the clubs along. A great mouth opened in the air, blowing a breath that swept the poor hearts away.

With her opera glasses still raised, Lethe pointed her fan at the battlefield. "They're strong."

"That's not just her own personal subordinates. There are mercenary troops among them."

"Mercenary troops?"

"I hear frightening rumors that after being hired once by Puk Puck, even for meager pay, a mercenary will stop seeking new employers. And, well, I highly doubt they say that simply because

it's comfortable. Since being in contact with *that* will steal certain things from you. So that's why their side has so many mercenary troops. It also seems they're all *'I'll do anything for my master's sake'* sort of hot-blooded types."

"Don't we have any mercenary magical girls on our side, eh?"

"We had those allies who have been reluctant to offer combat forces supply us with the Shufflin series in their possession. It's largely Shufflin IIs, but there are variations among them, such as Prototype Shufflin, Shufflin Desert Type, and Shufflin Trainer Type. I would argue those could be described as mercenaries."

"That sounds rather lackluster."

"Oh no, far from it," said Hamuel. "It's actually quite fantastic. Fundamentally speaking, one master can only make a contract with one set of Shufflins. However, temporary delegation of the right of command is possible even for someone who already holds a contract with another Shufflin. And right now, we're making use of that loophole to enable me to take command of a large force of Shufflins."

"I would have nothing to complain about if it had the, shall we say, visual flair of a variety of magical girls using a variety of magic, eh."

"Anyhow, we don't have the time—"

"What about Pfle?" Lethe interrupted. "Didn't she claim she would gather personnel using the powers of Magical Girl Resources?"

"She's gathering personnel from both inside and outside her department. However, it will still take time to deposit them here, since they must be examined to see if they are under Puk Puck's spell."

"So then…this may be rather difficult, eh."

The Shufflin IIs were doing their best, but the enemy's attack was pushing them back. The enemy forces were a hodgepodge and lacking in cohesion, but they had powerful offensive abilities and a wide range. All the Shufflin IIs had for projectile weapons was the diamonds' taser guns and birdlime guns, which weren't great when an attack came from outside their range.

Grasping her mic, Hamuel brought it to her mouth and squinted one eye. "What will we do?"

"It's time. Have them retreat."

"All right, everyone currently engaged in combat, retreat at a

very gradual pace. I don't mean that you should turn tail and run. Remain facing the enemy, prioritizing defense as you back off, please."

Just as ordered, the Shufflins gradually backed away from the enemy, and the esteemed guests in the VIP seating area were astir. The way they would see it, the battlefield they had assumed they were safely away from was approaching. The Shufflin IIs retreated even farther, dragging their fallen allies with them, and the commotion grew even greater. The enemy knew this was their main camp, too. It wouldn't be surprising for them to think that if they pushed forward a little more, they could crush this whole camp. The stray bullets hitting the ground were drawing closer and closer. Soon there wouldn't be anything "stray" about them.

Once the enemy was close enough that some of their allies might start thinking about coming up with a plan to flee, Lethe ordered, "Now. Crush them."

"Well then, everyone, just as we discussed," Hamuel said into her mic.

Instantly, a total of twelve Shufflin IIs leaped out from the VIP seating. They raced through the wasteland faster than the blink of an eye. Dodging the oncoming beams of light and even avoiding the lightning falling on them, undulating and splitting like an organism, the group sprinted through the obstacles to collide with the enemy.

It was a super-elite unit, all twelve of them specially selected aces of spades. Be it in poker, Grand Millionaire, or actual combat, they would never lose. They were too much for the enemy to even touch with water or lightning magic. With each swing of a spear, wielded with such speed that it looked like multiple spears, one more enemy fell. The enemy had come in too deep to flee, and it was too far away from the gate. The only option that remained for it was to be defeated in despair while reaching out in the direction of the closing gates.

Watching the battlefield through her opera glasses, Lethe nodded in satisfaction. "First battle's our victory, I'd say."

"The fruits of your command. It was indeed very splendid," Hamuel praised her.

"Your compliments are so vexing."

"If you find even my compliments vexing, then I suppose I can't say anything at all, can I…?"

As the two forces brutally clashed, the gates continued to move.

But it would still be more time before they opened fully. There were a number of things that had to be done by then: orders to subordinates, reorganization of the troops, preparations to march—those were all important, but first, Hamuel had to receive their guests.

The guests who came of their own volition to visit Lethe were no issue, but there were other guests who did not. Normally, it would be fine to say, *"What a rude lot they are, Lady Lethe, ha-ha-ha!"* and leave it at that, but they needed as much help as they could get right now.

Hamuel flipped through a catalog that listed the names of mages and magical girls. "Help is continuing to come from all over… Um." She looked around, but couldn't find the person she was searching for. With an, "I beg your pardon, one moment please," to Lethe, Hamuel made her wait as she circled behind the VIP seats, but she still couldn't find this person.

Then she discovered a mage and a magical girl behind a boulder at the bottom of a hill, yelling at each other.

"Are you in a position to be whining like a baby?!"

"Uluru's not whining! Uluru's just stating the obvious!"

"Coming all this way in the first place, when you're a material witness—"

"Uluru's not a material witness!"

Hamuel wasn't going to stick her nose into someone else's business. As long as she could tell Lethe that they had these people on their side, that was enough. Of the two people who were yelling at each other, she addressed the mage girl with the glasses. "Thank you for earlier. I'm very sorry to bother you when you seem so busy, but could you please introduce yourself to my boss? I believe it will encourage her to hear we have the cooperation of the Inspection Department."

Still looking grumpy, the bespectacled mage turned just her head toward Hamuel and snorted. "Hmph. Me, cooperate?"

"Huh? You were offering help in removing the Puk Faction, since they're illegally occupying the ruins…weren't you?"

"You guys are all villains of the same stripe, firing off shots at each other in a place like this. Once things are settled down, I'll be sure to get you investigated, so don't forget it." Saying only that, she turned back to the magical girl, and the two of them started snapping at one another again.

If this was how they were going to be, then she wasn't someone Hamuel would enjoy attending to, and if she were to introduce her to Lethe and things were to go south, that would be even more trouble.

Turning away from the pair, Hamuel started walking, but when she noticed *that*, she turned back. Not to the mage with the glasses; to the one who was wearing a robe like a mage, with the hood pulled down over her eyes. The magical girl—well, probably a magical girl. Hamuel put a hand to her temple.

Half the girl's face was hidden, but her nose and below were visible. From what Hamuel could just barely see of her features, that faint scatter of freckles was familiar. It was fairly unusual for a magical girl to have freckles.

There had been a magical girl of the Puk Faction like that. Hamuel seemed to recall her magic was to make you believe her lies. Because of that magic, Hamuel had been forced to get earplugs for all her forces.

She rubbed her temple up and down, then brought her hand an inch away from her head before tapping that same spot. Why was a magical girl of the Puk Faction in a place like this? When Pfle had said all that about her information source, had she perhaps meant this person? And then for some reason she had come as an employee of the Inspection Department, and was having a fight with her superior? There was no way.

Hamuel brought her mic to her mouth. Setting it to send to the sole recipient, "a magical girl who makes people believe lies are truth," so quietly that no one else could hear, she whispered, "Idiot."

"No, *you're* the idiot for calling me an idiot!" the magical girl with the low hood yelled.

The mage with the glasses had a look on her face like, *"What is this idiot talking about?"* as she eyed the girl who'd suddenly started spouting nonsense during their conversation.

Hamuel whispered, "You're the idiot, idiot," in the same way, and the magical girl with the low hood waved her arms up and down and stomped around.

The bespectacled mage, who'd just been yelling back and forth with her, seemed confused, saying, "Be quiet," and "What are you talking about?" in an attempt to calm her companion.

So Hamuel had the right person. Then to capture her, or to

question her? Or to watch and wait? She didn't look like a simple spy, and it also didn't seem as if she was a saboteur.

Hamuel contacted three aces of clubs and ordered them to coordinate to monitor her, following which she remembered she still had work left to do. She'd also left Lethe waiting.

If she couldn't introduce the Inspection Department, then she should just introduce a different department.

Searching the area for a bit, she discovered a familiar-looking woman in a suit. Her mouth was half-open as she gazed off toward the gate. Hamuel called out to her from behind. "Miss Yoshioka."

"Hmm? Oh, Hamuel," Yoshioka replied.

"It seems you've come to support us—thank you very much."

"Oh, I'm just here to liven things up a little, though."

"So then is Lady Ratsumu…?"

"I haven't brought the luggage here."

"The luggage"—she treated her like a thing. Yoshioka adjusted her glasses with her middle finger, shrugging on her right side only. Was that supposed to be friendly banter, or was it just a slip of the tongue? Hamuel couldn't figure it out, and so she smiled back vaguely.

"Well," Yoshioka continued, "being in that state, you know? If a stray bullet were to come flying, a thing like that wouldn't be able to dodge it."

That state and *a thing*—more not-good terms followed. Ratsumu was, all else aside, an incarnation of one of the Three Sages, so was this okay? Shouldn't Hamuel kind of tell her off? But maybe the Caspar Faction were more casual, and jokes like that were their usual, so Hamuel again responded with a vague smile.

"You seem so busy," said Yoshioka. "Did you need something?"

Hamuel got the feeling that if she took *this* one to Lethe, Yoshioka would quite casually put her foot in her mouth. So then it would be wise not to take her. With that vague smile still pasted on, Hamuel gradually backed away to put distance between them, and then when Yoshioka was looking away off toward the gate, she left. Whatever the time or occasion, association between factions had a lot of attending hassles.

◇ Puk Puck

The Osk Faction was moving faster than expected. It surely had a capable boss. If she became a friend, she was bound to be helpful in all sorts of ways, so Puk Puck had to do her best—for her sake, as well.

Everything they told her about the battle situation was bad news. Puk Puck was very sad. Everyone was joining up with the Osks to attack Puk Puck. They were all being so mean and trying to make her cry.

It would be easy to cry now and be sad about it. Some kind person would come console her, and maybe her sadness would subside for a bit. But when someone was trying to make you cry, going and crying was basically acknowledging that you were a crybaby. You couldn't make friends like that.

Puk Puck fought back her tears and squeezed her koala plush. It was big enough to enfold her, and when she put herself in its arms to squeeze it, her heart calmed, and she could be kinder.

Releasing the koala, she rolled over her rug and got up. The rug, the wallpaper, the ceiling, the credenza, the canopied bed, the mountain of plushes, the small drawers and flower vase and the white lily in the vase—her friends had made this room inside the ruins just like her own, so that it would be easier for Puk Puck to spend time here, easier for her to live here. Thanking everyone, Puk Puck said to the magical girl at her side, "Hey, Snowy Sis."

"What is it?"

"They said Puk's friends at the entrance to the valley are in big trouble. What d'you think we should do?"

"We can't do anything about the dead. If any are still alive, I would suggest we have them pull back to the entrance of the ruins."

Snow White had answered without even pausing to think about it. So she'd been thinking about this before Puk Puck had asked, but if Puk Puck hadn't asked, she would have stood there without saying anything. Since Puk Puck had managed to make her a friend and bring her along, she needed to make it so Snow White could do more for her.

"Sorry, Snowy," Puk said.

"About what?"

"Oh, no, it's just me thinking. Anyway, why should we pull back to the entrance of the ruins?"

"The space before the ravine is wider than the ruins' entrance. Magic that causes large-scale destruction can be used there, and

many soldiers can clash at once. The ruins' entrance is more restricted, and we can focus a small number of elites there to defend us. The attacker is at a disadvantage," Snow White explained.

"If it's just about the attacker being at a disadvantage, Puk thinks it'd also be okay to have friends waiting on the narrow ravine road. That won't work?"

"I believe setting an ambush in their path rather than sending forces to engage them would also be an option, but since the enemy will have Shufflins on reconnaissance and scouting, I doubt much could be gained from it."

"But, but, if we have a big fight near the ruins, wouldn't that be dangerous? If some spell were to miss and hit the ruins instead, then the device might go *boom* and be ruined, you know?"

"The same holds true for them. Preventing them from using attacks that cover a broad range that would harm the ruins is to our major advantage."

Puk Puck looked up at Snow White. She stood there expressionlessly, as usual, but she also appeared somehow proud. Puk Puck stretched up on her tiptoes to pet her head.

◇ Bluebell Candy

Sticking with Deluge and the others had brought her all the way out to a place like this. The air was abnormally dry, and there was nothing but wasteland as far as the eye could see. While watching the important-looking types who'd had vehicles pick them up for the trip out of the corner of her eye, Bluebell and the others were forced to run through the wasteland, guided to their forces' camp.

Glassianne was resting. Dark Cutie and Deluge hadn't come back. Nearby were those playing card magical girls who had just been fighting. Deluge in particular had battled these playing cards in the past. If there were any surviving cards from that time, Deluge would certainly remember them, so Bluebell wondered if it was okay for them to be there. If they were going to be here, Deluge should simply suck on Bluebell's candies to calm her heart, but since the night before, she wouldn't even touch them anymore. This saddened Bluebell, making her wonder what she'd even come here for.

She knew Deluge wasn't an idiot. She did think Deluge was trying to avoid drawing attention, but Bluebell really was hopelessly worried that Deluge might ruin it by doing something impulsive on the spur of the moment. The playing cards were running around busily, while all the other magical girls were kind of relaxed about the whole thing—rather, it was as if they saw this fight as someone else's business, saying things like, "Wow, wild stuff" as they spectated.

Meanwhile, the situation on the battlefield was in flux. The magical girls on their side made a sharp offensive, and when the enemy tried to strike back, they withdrew like a wave. When the enemy came in too deep, the powerful cards that had been hiding in the tents leaped out to go around beating down the enemy magical girls.

"Their proficiency is on another level, hmm."

Bluebell turned around to see a magical girl in a wheelchair. She'd thought of her as a scary person, but Bluebell's running into her now, in a situation where she didn't know anybody, made her seem like a savior. "Miss Pfle. You're here?"

"Come now, I clearly had to be here."

"Um…is that…all right?"

"Treading a tightrope is nothing new for me. I might even try out some acrobatics. More importantly—there, take a look."

Bluebell suddenly realized the enemy was completely gone from the battlefield. The gates continued to open slowly, and were already cracked open wide enough for a person to get through, but the card soldiers stayed still in front of the gates with their spears raised, not moving from that spot.

"They're not going in to attack?" Bluebell asked Pfle.

"I'm sure they're being cautious. You can sense a level of calm in them, that even if they plan to invade, it's not something to rush. But how frighteningly disciplined they are." Shading her eyes with her open right hand, Pfle looked at the battlefield. "Fundamentally speaking, every single magical girl is a bundle of individuality, so making use of them as a unit of soldiers is difficult. Being able to move them as a group with such fluidity… I'd say I'm quite impressed by the Shufflins, as usual. Of course, this is also dependent on the magic of the commander—oh, that is a convenient one to have. By the way."

With her right hand still up, she moved her wheelchair from

side to side, changing the direction it faced. “Where is Glassianne? It couldn’t be that she’s gone out on the battlefield.”

“She’s resting in a tent. She said her eyes are tired,” Bluebell told her.

“That’s unfortunate. We must have her continue to work for us. It should be fine to have her rest up for now… Well then, I’ll be off.” Turning around, Pfle went forward about six feet, stopped there, and suddenly turned back toward Bluebell. Bluebell automatically stepped back.

Unperturbed, Pfle said, “Which reminds me, about Deluge.”

“Y-yes?”

“Is she all right, with the Shufflins so close by?”

“Oh, no, it seems ever since yesterday evening, she’s calmed down.”

“Because of your candies?”

“No, not because of that. I mean, it seems that she doesn’t need my candies at all. She hasn’t been taking them this whole time.”

Pfle nodded, then did another sudden turn, spinning around a full 180 degrees. Watching Pfle leave, Bluebell thought, *She really is odd.*

Looking toward the tents and confirming that Deluge and Dark Cutie weren’t back yet, Bluebell sighed. She really had nothing to do here. Despite having come all this way so she could be even slightly useful to Deluge, to support her, she couldn’t dispel the feeling that she was not only useless, she was dragging her down.

All the people here—not just Pfle and Dark Cutie, every single one of them—had come with a job to do. Bluebell was the only one indecisively stuck halfway, who had come without bringing anything, swept along.

No matter what she did, she was tired. She popped a candy in her mouth. Once she felt a little better, she’d take a rest. She’d recharge her physical and mental energy so she could be more useful. Closing her eyes, she rubbed between them. It was really sunny here, and there wasn’t any decent cover, aside from the tents. Tents had popped up all over the place like bamboo after the rain, but most of them were in use by others.

In search of a free tent, she took several unsteady steps, but before she could take one more, something warm touched her mouth. Before she could even realize that it was someone’s hand, following her mouth, her throat was seized. Her hands shot

forward, but they swung through air, and, unable to yell or make any noise, without being seen by anyone, she was dragged into a tent.

The hand covering her mouth pulled away. Bluebell took the opportunity to open her mouth to yell, but something was stuffed into it. Something spherical melted on her tongue. She tried to spit it out, but then her mouth was covered again, and she couldn't. In the blink of an eye, the spherical something—the candy—melted completely, and Bluebell remembered that she was not Bluebell.

◇ Princess Deluge

When she had arrived here as Inspection Department staff, she hadn't tried to hide her face. Pfle had said it was fine, so then what problem could there be? Even if someone there did know that Deluge had killed a whole bunch of Shufflins in W City and they caused an uproar and confronted her, she just had to fight them off and run. She'd been desperate enough when she'd come that she hadn't cared, but there hadn't been any uproar or confrontation. So it was best to quietly remain in her tent.

If she'd been like she had been back then, she wouldn't have been able to take it. Quake, Tempest, Inferno, and Prism Cherry would all be revived in her mind with a feeling of vivid reality, and then they would have been brutally killed off. *Why did they have to die, why have things come to this, it's all because of those people, if only they were gone*, she'd have thought, and then she'd have caused an incident with the Shufflins with no thought as to the consequences. She was staying where she was now because she was thinking of the consequences. Because she was able to think.

"I heard something from the boss."

Deluge looked up. Sitting inside the closed tent was a magical girl in black, melting into the darkness. Her appearance was comparatively older, contributing to how silly she looked holding her knees in the corner.

"She said a mage from the Inspection Department picked up a magical girl at the Puk estate."

Deluge had also heard about this. Right as Glassianne had been investigating Shadow Gale's whereabouts, Pfle had told her a magical girl had escaped with Snow White's possessions, and they'd

taken her into custody.

"…So what about that?" Deluge asked.

"It was the one we fought at the amusement park. The one whose magic was to unconditionally make you believe what she said."

Deluge looked at Dark Cutie's face. She hardly ever moved the muscles there, but they had roused slightly now, tense from her cheeks to her mouth.

"The other magical girls with her I killed…," Dark Cutie went on, "were likely not just her allies, but her family."

"…So?"

"Even if we share a goal now, if she finds out I'm here, she might come to me herself."

"Do you want her to come kill you?"

Staring at the ground, Dark Cutie shook her head. "I'm considering what a heroine would do. Should she work with me for the sake of the greater goal, even if I'm the one who killed the ones she loves, or would she be driven by her passions to swoop down on me without thought to what it might cost? Which course of action would be more appropriate for a heroine? If she chose the latter, then the villain shouldn't be killed. I suppose I should treat the heroine with contempt by rubbing her weakness in her face, saying, *'How laughable you should try to kill me when that's all you've got! If you want to kill me, then get stronger'*—and by implying she come try again once the grand goal is accomplished, you could say everything will have fallen into place, but then wouldn't that put us at a prior stage where the rematch isn't fulfilled?"

She was muttering on and on as she stared at the ground. Was she talking to Deluge or to someone else? Or was she telling herself this? Being neither Micchan the Dictionary nor Glassianne, Deluge didn't know.

Even to Deluge, who was aware that she herself wasn't right in the head, it seemed like Dark Cutie was clearly losing her mind. All of them—Pfle, Micchan, and Glassianne—were aware of this fact, but they let her be.

If there was no actual harm in it, then whatever. It was just that Deluge wanted to think about other things right now, but Dark Cutie being so unusually talkative kept her from focusing on her thoughts, which was a little irritating.

"Should a villain be thinking about that kind of stuff?" She

didn't necessarily mean it, but the nasty remark just slipped out of her mouth.

"Do you think that planning out a scenario isn't appropriate for a villain?"

"Planning the scenario without the heroine finding out about it is part of a villain's job." No matter what Deluge said, Dark Cutie was going to justify herself anyway. Deluge closed her eyes.

In the empty darkness, all that could be heard was Dark Cutie's words. "An avenger can sometimes become a heroine. She might also become a villain. However, those who die a petty death without managing to become either are far more common. I'm sure that's true, and it's just that they're never known, because nobody tells their stories. Deluge—are you an avenger? Or are you not?"

Deluge opened her eyes. Dark Cutie was still staring at the ground.

CHAPTER 5
A NOSTALGIC GIFT

◇ **Pfle**

As Pfle approached with a raised hand and a “Hey,” the mage with the glasses—Mana—drew her eyebrows together with an exasperated expression, shoulders slumping as she sighed.

“If you’re going to disappear, then please say so,” Mana said. “You *are* aware how bad things got, aren’t you?”

“I am, believe it or not, the head of a department. I have a lot of instructions to give my staff. And besides, you seemed busy as well. I couldn’t help but have reservations. I wondered if it was best to speak with you. That’s all. I have no intention of making it an issue of your responsibility, so you have no need to worry.”

“Responsibility doesn’t have a damn thing to do with this. I haven’t raised your issue to the higher-ups yet. To the Inspection Department, you’re a guest. And besides, I’m here because of the Osk Faction’s unreasonable demands. This is entirely at my own discretion. That’s why I haven’t brought any subordinates.”

“Why?”

“If I submitted this issue where I should be submitting it, they would definitely waste a whole day on the meeting alone. I wouldn’t be surprised if this whole thing was over in under twenty-four hours. So then it’s better to have some agility and keep personnel to a minimum. As it is…” Shifting her gaze from behind her glasses, she looked at Uluru, standing at her side. “I’ve already been saddled with more hassle.”

“Did you just call Uluru a hassle?”

Mana totally ignored Uluru, who was puffing up her cheeks in a pout beside her. When Pfle had sneaked away from them before, they’d been yelling at each other, and it seemed they’d never

patched things up.

“I want you to save Snow White, pon!” A hologram rose up from the magical phone Uluru pulled out of her pocket.

“My,” Pfle said in surprise. “I heard your voice in the vehicle. I didn’t expect you were actually here.”

“It’s been a long time, pon, Pfle.”

“Indeed… It’s been quite some time, Fal.”

It seemed Fal was utterly disinterested in exchanging pleasantries with Pfle. Not at all touching on Pfle’s presence there, Fal continued, “About Snow White, pon. Fal can sense Snow White’s vital signs, pon. You can just think of it as Fal can basically get an idea of how she’s doing right now, pon.”

Pfle had heard that Fal was a cyber fairy that had been modified by Keek’s magic. Back when they had been interacting daily in the game, she hadn’t been made aware of it, but Fal had to have functions that most would not.

“Is your master the Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White?” Pfle asked.

“That’s where you’re going to start this discussion, pon? She is, but that’s not what Fal wants to talk about now, pon.”

“Yeah.” Uluru butted in from the side, leaning way forward to move her face close to Fal. “Uluru said before, right? That when Uluru went looking for Snow White’s things like she said, they all chased after. The timing was way too perfect. It just had to be that Snow White told.”

“There’s no reason for Snow White to report you, pon.”

“Uluru knows that. That’s not what Uluru’s trying to say, okay?”

Fal somersaulted in the air, paused, and spun again. Gold and green scales scattered around, and Uluru coughed and moved her face away. Even knowing it was a hologram, she reacted automatically.

“Snow White’s vitals are calm, pon. No particular physical or mental problems, which is the one thing Fal is relieved about, pon.”

“So then what’s the matter?” Pfle asked.

“Fal’s not done, pon. It’s weird that Snow White feels nothing wrong mentally, pon. In fact, she’s feeling happy and having fun, pon. That’s impossible, pon. She must have had some spell cast on her, pon.”

“See, it’s just as Uluru said after all.”

Fal ignored Uluru.

“You’re saying she’s being controlled by Puk Puck?” said Pfle.

“That’s what Fal is saying, pon,” Fal replied, and this time, Mana was the one to jump in.

“So then…why didn’t you say earlier?”

“It wouldn’t be smart to talk about Snow White before getting a basic grasp on the situation, not knowing who’s friend and who’s foe, pon. The things that Fal can do without a master are limited, pon. Telling an enemy these things by accident would leave Fal helpless to do anything about it, pon,” the mascot replied.

Mana didn’t criticize Fal after that. She fell silent with a bitter expression on her face. Like Fal, she was also probably having a hard time judging who was friend and who was foe.

Pfle tilted her head to one side and cracked her neck. Perhaps because the air was dry, it made a more satisfying *pop* than usual. “I’ve heard they’re holding a ceremony to activate an ancient magical device… Is that something Snow White’s magic would be useful for? Well, they could well be using her in some way I couldn’t imagine, but it seems to me they could put her to better use in other ways.”

Mana glumly nodded, and Pfle nodded as well. “Chief of Security, perhaps,” Pfle went on. “With a title like Magical-Girl Hunter, it may be better to have her on offense rather than

defense… Regardless, she'll be a fearsome foe."

As long as Puk Puck existed, the list of enemies would continue to increase. With the nickname of Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White would most certainly be a strong opponent. Pfle ran her tongue over her upper lip to moisten it. It was just about dry to the point of cracking.

"A foe, pon? If you run into her, will you kill her, pon?" Fal somersaulted in the air, scattering enough scales to cover his whole image. Eventually the scales faded and disappeared, and Pfle could see the wavering image of the mascot floating there.

At the same time, Uluru leaned forward, moving her face close to the cyber fairy. "Uluru's job with Snow White still isn't done. We've still got work to do, so Uluru might punch her, but Uluru won't kill her. Probably."

Mana sighed. She looked resigned. "Sorry, but I can't help you. There's nothing I can do within my department, either. If there's something going on with Snow White, then that's her responsibility."

Mana's remark made Uluru flare up at her, saying, "That's awful!" while Mana turned away, saying, "That's just how it is." It would be difficult for Mana to intervene in this matter. She couldn't invest effort in saving a single employee.

Unless they were specially configured, cyber fairies would not have expressions. For that reason, it could be more difficult to read their mental states than those of humans. But there were elements unique to them, such as inflection, tone of voice, movement of wings, scale output, etc. Fal was of the type that was fairly easy to understand. Were such differences due to the age of the program or the individual unit, or were they up to the master?

Fal was sincerely worried about Snow White, but there was no reason for Pfle to make concessions here. Just as Fal was worried about Snow White, Pfle's number one priority was Mamori Totoyama.

"I have high hopes for your efforts," said Pfle. "I…yes, I will be praying for Snow White's safety."

"Hold on, pon. You're praying, pon?"

Suddenly, she found Fal, Uluru, and Mana all looking at her. "What do you want from me? You're saying prayers alone aren't sufficient?"

"Please, pon. I want you to tell the higher-ups not to kill Snow

White, pon."

"They've been on edge since before the killing began. I may be acting as coconspirator, but functionally, I'm no more than an underling. I'm not in a position to offer opinions."

Pfle had already made a "request" regarding Shadow Gale. She couldn't add saving Snow White on top of that. It would not only put her in a position to be taken advantage of, but it would also place her too deeply in the enemy's debt. It wasn't as if it was totally out of her reach, and Fal would have gotten a sense of that. But Pfle had no reason to compromise that far for the mascot's sake. Shadow Gale, who was wielding a wrench on the device, was one thing, but Snow White was raising weapons against the Osk Faction, and the difficulty level of the ask to not kill her was completely different.

"And so I will be praying for her safety only," said Pfle. "I cannot do any more than that."

Static ran through Fal's hologram, and it blurred for a second. Pfle turned her wheelchair 180 degrees, turning her back to Fal, Uluru, and Mana. "I apologize, Miss Mana, but I will take my leave. Understand that sometimes, surrendering yourself can turn out like this. We're at war, after all, and I'm very occupied with the many tasks to be done."

"Wait, pon."

Pfle moved her wheelchair onward. There was little reason for her to wait. Her list of things to do was piling up.

"Wait, pon!"

"Wait up! Listen to what Fal has to say!"

Fal and Uluru could yell at her together, but it wouldn't make a difference. Pfle moved her wheelchair onward.

"Couldn't the two of us…talk in private, pon?"

Pfle stopped her wheelchair and turned back.

Uluru looked at Fal. Mana looked at Fal, too. Pfle, of course, was also looking at Fal. Fal stirred uncomfortably under the eyes of the three girls.

◇ Uluru

"Who was that just now?" Uluru asked.

"The head of the Magical Girl Resources Department," Mana

replied. “She was the one talking up a storm at you through the magical phone in the car before.”

“Ahh, her, huh? Now that you mention it, I guess their voices were the same.”

“That’s not something you need to worry about in the first place.”

“Oh, there you go again. If she’s someone important, though, Uluru has to go greet her properly, too, though.”

“She’s not important at all—a good-for-nothing of a boss.”

This mage named Mana seemed even more childish than Uluru. Uluru was fully aware that a mage’s looks were as deceiving as those of a magical girl. There were just as many mages as magical girls among those who served the Three Sages, and Uluru had also heard some even lived to incredible ages like hundreds or thousands of years like it was normal.

But she figured Mana might not be so much older than she looked. The way she would snap at important people was proof that she was a child. Uluru also thought Mana made attempts to belittle her because she was a child.

Hence why Uluru asked, “What’re you here for?”

Mana must have understood that she was under attack. She was already irritated to begin with, and when Uluru hit the nail on the head like that, Mana got this look on her face like she was ready to smack her as she spat, “I’m here to catch the bad guys.”

“Not to stop the ceremony, like everyone else is saying?”

“If we catch the bad guys, that will put a stop to the ceremony, too.”

“You’re not thinking about this at all.”

“I’m thinking about it more than you.”

Uluru felt ready to snap. Her own nail was getting hit hard on the head. Unlike the other magical girls, Uluru had not been proactively trying to stop the ceremony. Once she’d gotten away from Puk Puck, she’d thought, “Maybe she was a really terrifying person.” She’d easily accepted that Snow White was being controlled, and that fact confused her. She was thinking that Puk Puck actually was capable of that and maybe the ceremony was trying to accomplish something horrifying. Now she could kind of understand Sachiko’s desire to escape.

But still, if the question was if it was okay to join an opposing force to try to stop Puk Puck, then she wasn’t so sure anymore. It

was still a fact that Puk Puck had done so much for Uluru and her sisters. At this point, Uluru had become something she would never have even considered before—a traitor.

She didn't want to think about that stuff, so she focused on a goal that was easier to think about: getting Snow White back and taking Pythie Frederica down with her.

Uluru couldn't argue against Mana. So she sulked. "You're always making fun of Uluru like that."

"I'm not making fun of you at all. It's weird that you're even here in the first place."

Uluru started to say something, mouth half-open as she searched for the words, looking at Mana. She was aware that she was hanging in limbo. But she still didn't know what she should do. She wanted to save Snow White. She wanted to keep her promise. She didn't want them to use the contract Sachiko had left. But she didn't want to go against Puk Puck, either. Even saying that, though, she didn't feel like she wanted to follow Puk Puck no matter what. Uluru's mouth closed on its own.

After waffling and worrying, she opened her mouth again, thinking she just had to say something. "Of course Uluru is here. Uluru's getting revenge. And Uluru needs Snow White for that, too. Since Snow White is getting back at the same person. Frederica is a really bad person, right? If you're with Inspection, don't you know that?"

Mana's eyes widened, and she showed Uluru a frightening openmouthed expression with her teeth bared. Uluru privately panicked, wondering if she'd said something to make her mad, so she puffed herself up particularly large to keep from showing that fear. "What?"

"Did you say Frederica?"

"Oh, so you know about her, after all? She's a real bad person."

"Yeah…she is. I know. Too well…" Touching her fist to her jaw, Mana looked down. She was muttering something under her breath.

"Hey. What's wrong? Have you gone crazy?"

"I'll help you, too."

"What?"

"I'll help you take down Frederica."

"Huh? …Uh, well…thanks? Um, explain it so that Uluru can understand. Maybe you think it's fine as long as you understand, but that doesn't work out in the real world. You get it? Even Uluru

has messed up before for reasons like that, and got taught by others, until finally—"

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me…? This is Hamuel."

Uluru automatically looked around and saw a bunch of other people doing the same thing. She didn't see anyone who might be the source of the voice.

"I am sending my voice to all of you directly via magic. This is neither an auditory hallucination nor madness, so don't worry. Now then, we're finally heading into the ravine to launch our attack. We can anticipate that this will be far more dangerous than it has been thus far. You cannot be setting up seats for yourselves to observe from a distance. I would hope that you consider anyplace you might stand as part of the battlefield. It's unfeasible to be protecting you all while fighting in such an environment, and the odds that our efforts will fail to bear fruit and end in vain are not at all insignificant. And so here we will be parting ways with all noncombat personnel—"

There was murmuring all around. Here and there, Uluru could see some briskly readying themselves to leave. Uluru had no intention of turning back now. Maybe whatever she did now would just be going halfway, and she really hated that she was here because she had no choice, left with no place to go after being chased out of the estate, but still, even then, when she thought of Sachiko, when Sorami rose in her mind, she lost the desire to flee.

Mana still seemed to be mulling something over. Her indecisiveness was causing problems for Uluru. There was no way for them to run now—there wasn't even a road back. They had no choice but to keep going.

Uluru was about to yell at her, but right before she could, Mana looked up. "You said Snow White is trying to take down Frederica, too, right?"

"Huh? Um. Yeah."

"So then she's necessary personnel, too. We're saving her."

"Well, okay, then? Huh?"

Mana started walking toward the magical girl in the wheelchair. Flustered, Uluru chased after her.

◇ Shadow Gale

The magical girls who served Puk Puck were the chosen ones. But

since any one person couldn't be the sole individual serving her, there was also competition among her devotees. Everyone who followed Lady Puk Puck wanted to be the most useful to her, but it wasn't as if every single one of them could serve her as ideally as they wanted. They were all thinking something like, *If I could, I'd like to sabotage the others so I'd be the only one to serve her, but that would make Lady Puk sad, and being the only one serving her would just be too much work anyway, so oh well, I guess it's fine if the others get the right to work by her side, too.*

Even Shadow Gale, who hadn't been serving Puk Puck long, could sense this. Though her colleagues were allies, comrades, and rivals, they were not friends.

However, in a crisis, they ignored their usual squabbles and joined hands in cooperation. That was what Puk Puck wanted, and those who would work for Puk Puck's sake had to make sure their contributions were as big as possible. And so the drive for synergy would be their weapon to carve a new path.

In order to activate the device, first, they had to peel off the talismans that sealed it. There were magical paper talismans stuck all over the surface of the device that would put to sleep anyone who looked at, touched, or approached it. What to do about this troublesome obstacle? Following the instructions Puk Puck had written up for them, the magical girls went to work.

First, they balled up paper and smashed rocks to make garbage. Putting glue on the trash they'd created, they threw it from far enough that the talismans' effects didn't reach them. The paper garbage and rock bits stuck to the device, and then, using "magic to shoot ink," they turned the whole thing into a mess. Then they tied a "magic sponge that can clean anything" at the end of a long stick to clear away all the mess, the talismans along with it, since the magic perceived them as being part of the garbage.

This made the device squeaky clean. But all this was just to get the talismans off, and it took a lot of time.

And there was only one thing that made them happy as they worked.

"You guys are all working so hard!"

That thing was Puk Puck coming in to check on their progress. And she brought a pot of cookies for them to enjoy as they worked, too. The girls' faces had been growing dim, but now they sparkled, smiles unfurling like blooming flowers, and each one of them took a

cookie, saying, “Thank you so much, thank you so much,” as they sincerely relished them. Magical girls didn’t require sugar to power their brains, but it was soothing for them to eat the cookies Puk Puck had brought with her. Their work became more efficient, and the wheels of their labor spun faster, ticking out an even more precise rhythm.

However, it wasn’t nothing but happy things. There were also sad things.

“Sorry, guys. Puk has other work to go do now.”

She said she wouldn’t be coming back for the time being. Shadow Gale was saddened. But if she let that show on her face, Puk Puck would be sad, too. *If I cry now, they’ll laugh at me*, she thought to encourage herself, and, putting on a smile, she watched Puk Puck go.

After Puk Puck left, it was back to work, work, and more work.

◇ Pfle

Dark Cutie and Princess Deluge were sitting in the tent and facing away from each other. Dark Cutie was holding her knees and staring at the ground, while Deluge was cross-legged and looking toward the entrance. Nevertheless, it seemed they’d had some kind of conversation. Pfle had heard murmuring voices from outside the tent.

“Pardon me,” said Pfle. “I’ll be using this for a bit. There’s no other place I can get some privacy.”

Dark Cutie stood and went by Pfle toward the entrance, and was about to leave when Pfle called out to her, “Could you stand at the entrance to keep anyone from coming inside, Dark Cutie?”

There was no use expecting Dark Cutie to make inferences about what to do, but if you gave explicit orders, she’d do the job. With a slight movement of her head, Dark Cutie left the tent. That head movement was probably a nod. She wasn’t the type to consider that Pfle wouldn’t be able to tell what it was from behind.

“I’m very sorry, but could you also step out?” Pfle said to Deluge.

Deluge didn’t reply, glaring back at Pfle, but eventually she stood up resignedly and exited the tent.

Pfle laid her magical phone on her lap and turned it on. The

hologram that appeared there looked all around restlessly, and then, after making sure there was no one around, turned to Pfle.

"Fal can sense a magical girl outside, pon."

"That's our watch. She won't be listening. Anyway, didn't you have something to tell me?"

The mascot's hologram flapped its wings a few times, rising to a higher position, then stopped flapping, dropping down. It seemed those wings were moving slightly more sluggishly than before.

"Please, pon. Fal wants you to save Snow White, pon."

"You said that earlier."

"It doesn't matter what happens to Fal, pon."

"You didn't say that, but I could figure it out."

The two of them eyed each other for a while. Pfle did feel some sympathy. Both Fal and Pfle were among proper magical girls fighting for a just cause, while each of them operated for the sake of one individual they personally wanted to save. And so she was sympathetic, but Pfle would step on even someone she sympathized with for the sake of her goal. That was who she was now.

"So then get on with it," said Pfle. "You had something to say, didn't you?"

"Snow White gave Fal something to hold on to, pon."

"Oh?"

"To be honest, Fal is angry, pon. Fal knows that Snow White really agonized over and thought hard about her decision to entrust this to Fal, but Fal thinks this whole thing was unacceptable, pon. Making it like your wrongs had never happened and then shoving it all onto Snow White, who had nothing to do with it, and then saying, *'I'm just going to not know anything and live a normal life!'* doesn't work, and it's because it actually didn't work that things have wound up like this, pon."

"As I asked before: What is it she entrusted to you?"

"Your memories, pon."

Pfle had anticipated this somewhat, and now things were all coming together. She was fairly satisfied, but she didn't show it. Keeping her expression entirely serious, she prompted Fal to continue. "And so?"

"Though you shouldn't actually be getting this, Fal is making the arbitrary decision to give it to you, pon. Like Fal just said, Fal doesn't like the way things have gone with this, but even without all that thinks it's best to give it back, pon. You getting your

memories back has got to be the best way to make things work out, pon."

"I think that's a wise decision." Pfle meant to say that without any sarcasm, but perhaps it had been taken as such. Fal somersaulted three times in the air, scattering scales. Since it was naturally darker inside the tent than out, the faint rays of light slanting in made the wafting dust slightly visible, and it mixed with the scales of the hologram to give off the impression of even more scattering.

"In exchange for returning your memories, Fal wants you to promise you'll save Snow White, pon."

"A verbal promise is enough?"

"Fal will believe in you, pon."

Pfle's eyes widened ever so slightly, and a peaceful smile rose to her lips. Just how many people could say to Pfle that they trusted her, these days? Thinking about it now, this cyber fairy had been like this back in the game, too. Fal believed in magical girls.

Pfle gave it a clear nod. "So be it. I will promise. However, my highest priority is elsewhere. Don't forget that Snow White is ultimately number two."

"Fal knows, pon. The one you want to save is Shadow Gale, pon?"

Pfle laid her right middle finger over her lips. Letting out a breath, she felt her middle finger was slightly damp. "…What makes you think that?"

"Fal was there, too, when you got smacked in the face with a wrench, pon."

"Ohh, I see. Now that you mention it, yes." She remembered that Fal would also have heard her confession that she would do anything for Shadow Gale. It was quite astounding for him to declare trust in her after hearing that. Actually, perhaps it was hearing that that had enabled the cyber fairy to trust her?

"Take off the battery cover on this magical phone, pon."

Turning it over as instructed, Pfle removed the battery cover. The battery that should have been there was absent, and a single candy that glowed a rainbow of colors rolled into her palm. She plucked it up in her fingers, raising it to the light. The reflections under the light didn't stay the same color for even an instant. The hues flowed and transformed, beautiful, but also eerie.

"It looks similar," Pfle muttered, turning her face to the tent

entrance. To be precise, she was turning toward where Deluge had left from the entrance of the tent. This candy looked just like the ones Bluebell had been giving her, the ones she'd been sucking on.

"What's wrong, pon?"

"You don't have to worry about it. More importantly, your magical phone can run without batteries?"

"Now *that's* something *you* don't have to worry about, pon. Even Fal doesn't understand everything about Fal, pon."

"Well, I suppose so. So I think I have an idea of it, but what would you have me do with this?"

"Put it in your mouth and let it dissolve, pon."

Pfle put the candy on her tongue. Almost an inch wide, the candy was a bit large. It felt slightly uncomfortable as Pfle put it in her mouth, but even before her saliva had covered it, there was a bubbling sensation as the candy melted and was quickly gone.

"I see. How convenient," Pfle mused.

"Do you understand now, pon?"

Her memories were already back. There was no sense of discomfort or of accomplishment. They'd returned as easily as if they'd been there to begin with and were revealing themselves. Her one good eye dropped to her right hand, and she squeezed her hand tight. She'd had a similar experience once before. That had been inside the game, where Fal had taken on the role of guide. Back then, she'd been forced to clean up the vomit. She still remembered it clearly.

Raising her chin, Pfle looked at Fal. "You know all about these memories as well?"

"I just know what Snow White learned from hearing the voice of Shadow Gale's heart, pon."

"I see… Not like this is new to me, but I was really up to quite a lot, hmm?"

Fal didn't reply. He somersaulted instead. Perhaps he had been about to comment but then decided to say nothing, out of consideration.

"I will save Shadow Gale." The words fell naturally from Pfle's lips, and she lifted her chin automatically. Fal was giving her his usual expressionless look. "Of course, I will also save Snow White."

"Naturally, pon. It's a promise, pon."

"It seems that honesty just slips right out when I'm with you, unfortunately."

“You don’t seem honest to me, pon…”

“Comparatively honest.”

Pfle put the battery cover back on the magical phone. Whether there was a battery in there or not, it was best to put something like this back in its place. Just like her memories.

Then there were throat-clearing sounds at the entrance to the tent.

“May I come in?” asked Dark Cutie.

“Oh, you were knocking,” Pfle replied. “What is it, Dark Cutie? Has something happened?”

“Glassianne says there’s something she wants to talk about.”

“Show her in.”

Glassianne walked into the tent with heavy steps, her expression glum. Expression aside, her slumped shoulders, bent back, hanging arms, her whole body expressed weariness with her job, and she wasn’t trying to hide that from her employer, Pfle, either. Though she’d never had a disposition you could call hardworking, she’d never been this bad before. Not only was the job bigger than usual, Micchan, who’d lightened the load for Glassianne, was now gone. Both things would be making her more tired. She was surely bursting with the desire to go back to her shop and bake some cakes.

But still, Pfle couldn’t have her go yet. No matter who else Pfle brought in, Glassianne was irreplaceable.

“What happened?” Pfle asked her.

“Um, someone from the Inspection Department, plus that girl who came from Puk Puck’s estate… What was her name again? You know, the lying one. There are card soldiers keeping watch on them. Ace of clubs rank, and three of them. They’re keeping a pretty tight watch on the two of them.”

“Well enough that no one but you would be able to find them?”

“Yeah, I figure.”

“By the way, do you know where Deluge went?”

“Huh? No… Should I look for her?”

“No, it’s fine. She’ll be back soon regardless.”

That three aces of clubs had been assigned to watch them was a big deal. It was fair to see diverting that many fighters to them as something you couldn’t explain away. But choosing to simply put a watch on them was a move that left room for negotiation. It showed a level of intellect, and took for granted the obvious considerations:

to avoid creating enemies as much as possible, to avoid making a public deal of things and having everyone know, to avoid them getting violent.

"Glassianne," said Pfle.

"Yeah?"

"Borrow a free tent to rest in. You're allowed to have a nap. I think it will be loud, but worst case, you can use earplugs. There are the ones that Micchan left, aren't there?"

"Is it okay for me to sleep? There was just that announcement that we're heading into the ravine now, though."

"Either way, you don't belong on the battlefield. Dark Cutie, look for Deluge and bring her here. I have business with her."

"Right."

"Fal, I'm sure there's more you want to say, but you'll have to bear with me a little longer."

"Where are you going, pon?"

"To the bad guys."

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

"How do I look, eh?"

"…What do you mean by that?"

Lethe raised her right hand to stop the two hearts who were fanning her. The wind had made her headdress slide a bit sideways, and she prodded it to adjust it. Her riding a palanquin meant that many eyes gathered on her, so perhaps that was why she was worrying more about her appearance than before. Hamuel was in a constant state of anxiety, thinking, *Standing out like this, who knows when we'll be attacked!*

"There's a lack of play," said Lethe.

"Right," said Hamuel. "Play. But this is a serious place of battle, you know? Isn't it obvious there's no play?"

"It's in situations where one must not play that Puk Puck makes a show of having fun and playing, eh. That's the sort of magical girl she is. That means that us also choosing not to attack seriously, slowly and gradually investing forces, only to throw everything at the enemy the moment before they think, *Oh, we're too late*…is no longer an option."

"Oh, was that your intention?"

“Would I have allowed those VIP seats to be made if it weren’t?”

Hamuel couldn’t say, *I don’t know just how detached from the real world you are, so I didn’t know what your view was.* “I have my hands full simply managing the work I’ve been given. I couldn’t possibly consider that as well.”

“Your modesty looks rather not like modesty, but flattery.”

“You jest.”

“And as flattery, it’s so transparent, I more often assume it’s a sort of sarcasm.”

“Well, I—”

“Is it actually that, eh?”

“Please let me off the hook here.”

They had to put a stop to the ceremony as quickly as possible, but they were slow to move and this march was lagging. The gates were opened all the way, but they were still putting off the departure, waiting for reports from the advance troops. This was all rational strategy. But despite how rational it was, Hamuel sensed Lethe was being too hesitant. Lethe had suggested she was being sarcastic, and now that she thought about it, maybe she had been. There are times when even someone in a position where she can’t afford to be sarcastic will want to make a sharp remark anyway.

Hamuel had instructed the Shufflin IIs in the vanguard to report to her on absolutely every detail. They had placed cameras at every bottleneck, probing for traps and ambushes as they made their way onward. But even with all this, Lethe still remained wary.

“You’re thinking I’m too cautious, eh?” said Lethe.

“Not at all,” Hamuel replied. “Even someone ignorant in strategy like myself understands that this is the behavior of someone who first seeks to know the enemy.”

“You’re bad at hiding what you think.”

“I am occasionally complimented for my honesty.”

Even if it seemed progress was lagging and they weren’t getting anywhere, that was due to her injecting her own feelings into things, and they were in fact moving steadily onward. The report that light was streaming down farther ahead in the ravine relieved Hamuel. But then immediately after that, communications cut off.

“What is the scout doing?” Lethe asked.

“I believe there must have been some kind of accident… I’ll tell them to report in.”

Three minutes after she gave the message over her communicator, a group of diamond Shufflin IIs tumbled over, limbs tangling, whispering, “Situation” into Hamuel’s ear, and Hamuel’s brows came together.

“What happened?” Lethe asked.

“Um…they say that some of the Shufflin IIs in the lead aren’t coming back.”

“Why not?”

“From what those behind them say, there’s a magical girl sitting in the open space in front of the ruins.”

“Just one?”

“Yes, one. It seems Puk Puck is alone, and she’s set down a chair in the open space in front of the ruins to sit. And a number of the Shufflin IIs who saw her from a distance are staggering over in her direction. The others who were with them hurried back.”

Lethe adjusted the angle of her headdress and expelled a quiet sigh. “Does she think of this as play? Or is she serious?”

“Play… I doubt it’s that. Though it doesn’t seem like a decision made by someone with ordinary powers of judgment, either.” Hamuel tried imagining it. Shoving all her subordinates into the ruins they were supposed to protect and going outside alone. “I believe this may be abnormal, after all.”

“But this also differs from Puk’s usual methods, eh. It feels to me as if some other will is directing her.” Lethe considered awhile before giving instructions. “Have the combat engineers and those who can work with them dig out at the threshold to that open space to create an area big enough for all the forces to remain on standby. No blasting. Consider that if we were to damage the ruins, worst case, the world would be destroyed.” Lethe’s expression didn’t say whether she was exaggerating or just warning. This device had been left behind by the mythical figure that was the First Mage, a figure above even the Three Sages. Anything could happen, and it wasn’t as if this were something that would go away if they yelled about it being a nuisance.

Hamuel offered a grave nod. “Understood.”

“But still…the more I think about it, the more it doesn’t seem like something Puk would do. I doubt that she would act on the orders of another, so what could she be up to there, eh?”

Hamuel nodded wordlessly, then promptly reached out to all personnel.

Immediately upon receiving contact from the aces of clubs, Hamuel knitted her eyebrows. It was the team she had ordered to keep watch on those two from Inspection.

CHAPTER 6
ETERNAL BRILLIANCE

◇ **Glassianne**

Between working for Magical Girl Resources and skirting death many times with Dark Cutie and Micchan the Dictionary, Glassianne had kind of figured out something. Micchan and Dark Cutie both devoted themselves to their work daily in order to up their chances of survival. They sacrificed enjoyment and pleasure to train and torture themselves because they wanted to live.

Glassianne understood this, but didn't sympathize. If you wore yourself down with work and kept thinking about it even on your own time, then what was your life worth? Even if they were making a lot of money, living like Micchan or Dark Cutie, you didn't need all that cash anyway, and they were also far from status or prestige.

Glassianne didn't go out on the front lines; her main mission was support and observation from the rear. It wasn't as if she didn't put her body and life on the line, but she didn't do it as much as the other two. Was that the reason she couldn't sympathize? Thinking that, just once, she'd tried asking Micchan about it directly.

"Hey, Micchan, so you do violent stuff for your job, right? And then your hobby of visiting libraries is because it's useful for work, right? That means no mental rest, right? Isn't it hard? You're not the type who like, loves battle or gets pleasure out of killing, right?"

Hearing that, Micchan had laughed. Not the kind of breezy laugh you could describe by saying she was "laughing it off." It was a kind that left bitterness in the corners of the mouth, when you had no choice but to laugh anyway.

"More so than you think, Anne. I do like to fight. I don't know about our leader, but… Have you tried asking her?"

"I think I can guess. She'd say, *'It's because I'm a villain.'*"

“Well, of course.”

And the discussion had ended there. But it just didn’t seem to Glassianne that Micchan had been speaking sincerely. It wasn’t particularly that she wanted their relationship to be one of heart-to-heart understanding. Their relationship was purely work based—when they were off, they hardly saw one another. And the one who had liked that for the lack of hassle was definitely not Micchan or Dark Cutie, but Glassianne. But now that she was in this situation, it bothered her. It was kind of like the scale that clung to the bathtub drain and wouldn’t come off. You couldn’t see it, but it was so irritating to know it was there. She could no longer have an earnest conversation with Micchan—Micchan was gone. Murdered. Glassianne was enough of a professional that, more than she felt sorrowful over Micchan’s death, she felt afraid to know there was an enemy strong enough to have killed her—but was that because she was a professional, or simply because she was coldhearted? Even now, she wasn’t mourning Micchan but regretting that she could no longer ask what Micchan really thought.

Lying on her back in the tent, Glassianne turned her head to the side. Dark Cutie was facing away from her, doing stretching exercises for her wrists and hands. She was casually pulling off feats like touching her right index finger to the back of her right hand. No matter how many times Glassianne saw it, Dark Cutie bent her fingers at such unnatural angles, Glassianne couldn’t believe she even had joints.

“Hey, Leader,” said Glassianne.

“What?”

“Your job involves things like killing and people trying to kill you, right? And then, even when you’re off work, that’s all you think about, staying cooped up at home, right? Don’t you get tired of that? I kinda don’t feel like I could do the same thing.”

Dark Cutie straightened up enough that you could even tell from behind, puffing out her chest. “It’s because I’m a villain.”

Glassianne burst out laughing, and Dark Cutie turned to her with a confused expression. “Was something funny?”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t be offended. Nothing’s funny, nothing at all. It’s just, that was exactly what I expected you to say. And it kinda hit my funny bone. You get that sometimes, right?”

Dark Cutie straightened her head again, then slowly shook it. “Let me correct that.”

“Huh? Correct what?”

“It’s not just because I’m a villain.” With an incredibly serious expression, Dark Cutie once again puffed out her chest. “It’s because I’m a first-rate villain.”

Glassianne rolled facedown on the ground and laughed out loud with her cheek on the sheet. After laughing for a little while longer, she took a breath and said to Dark Cutie, “Hey, Leader.”

“What?” Dark Cutie sounded even grumpier than before.

“There’s a visitor coming. A card soldier. Diamond suit, just one, with no weapon.”

Dark Cutie jumped to her feet and turned back to the entrance of the tent. Before long, they heard footsteps, and then there was a dull knock at the entrance. When she prompted the person to come in, a diamond card soldier peeked in with the utmost trepidation. She hadn’t realized they’d already noticed her coming.

With a strange intonation that made you gather she wasn’t used to talking, the diamond card solider told them, “Pfle is calling for Dark Cutie.” Glassianne pushed herself off the ground as she tapped Dark Cutie’s calf twice with her middle finger. That was the sign meaning *no problem*. She’d already seen through her magical glasses that Pfle was speaking with the card soldiers’ boss. Though she could only see images and couldn’t hear what they were saying, the atmosphere had been completely amicable. Even if Dark Cutie was being called over, it wasn’t going to suddenly turn into something.

Dark Cutie was taken away by the card soldier. Now all alone, Glassianne folded her hands to pillow her head and crossed her legs, bringing up her knees.

Dark Cutie would be heading to the ruins where the fight would happen, while Glassianne would remain among the guests, remaining in safety as she provided backup from there. Perhaps the fact that she was placing herself in the safe zone was making her feel bad, creating a breeding ground for unnecessary thoughts. Add exhaustion on top of that, and that was why she’d wound up like this.

But regardless, she had absolutely no interest in personally heading onto the battlefield. She told herself this was basically just division of labor. If she was somewhere safe, then at the very least, she wasn’t going to die. Praying for Micchan the Dictionary to rest in peace, Glassianne also prayed for Dark Cutie to come back safely, then yawned audibly.

◇ Pfle

The atmosphere was slightly more informal than that of the discussion among the three of them a minute ago—since they'd chosen a place where Hamuel's boss Lethe was not present to talk.

"Hey, now that we have a fresh chance to make nice, I'm glad to see you're such a reasonable person," Pfle said.

"I feel quite the same way," Hamuel replied.

Pfle smiled at Hamuel, and Hamuel responded with a smile of her own. Pfle was aware that her own smile was not accompanied by much joy, and she was certain the same was true of Hamuel. She doubted Hamuel wanted to be approached by her right now.

CQ Angel Hamuel was, just as Pfle had said, a reasonable person. Present her with something to gain, and she'd be glad, show hostility, and deal with it appropriately. In this business, where there were no few people far and away from common sense who served pleasures that were difficult to understand, Pfle was quite thankful to deal with someone who possessed an ordinary sense of values, someone she could make guesses about. But even if Hamuel was a reasonable person, if you asked if she was easy to deal with, then the answer was no, and for that reason, her reasonableness alone was not something to be glad about.

Her wings were as meager as chicken bones after they are taken out of the broth, with forget-me-nots sprinkled over them, and her costume overall was delicate and slight. In contrast with the fragile impression given by her appearance, her answers were businesslike.

"'True love, don't forget me,' hmm? I seem to recall they're from the legend of the knight," said Pfle.

"Huh?" Hamuel gave her a look that said, *"What are you talking about?"*

If that was her response to flower language, that meant she hadn't decorated her costume out of any particular fixation with forget-me-nots. So then it would seem like something you'd go look up, but had she not even done that, or had she looked it up, but then forgotten? Perhaps it wasn't that she was businesslike and more that she was utilitarian.

"Though we may have gotten off on the wrong foot, our association need not necessarily be severed," said Pfle.

"Oh, right. Yes, you're exactly right. Since, after all, now that the Osks and Caspars have joined hands, we're unbeatable, the Puk

Faction is nothing to fear, and all that." Hamuel wiped the droplets that had scattered from her plastic bottle off the table, then put the plastic bottle on the table again. She wasn't doing this because she was fussy. If she were fussy, she would have used a handkerchief to wipe and then placed the bottle on top of the handkerchief. *She's stressed*, Pfle thought.

Hamuel also knew that Pfle had been trying to get Premium Sachiko—since Pfle had just told her that now. Hamuel would have realized that back when Pfle had told her the magic abilities of her subordinates, but Pfle had shown her own brand of consideration there, figuring it would be easier for Hamuel to deal with if Pfle didn't come out and say it, so she hadn't explicitly put it into words.

Now things had changed. Pfle's memories had returned. The heavy mist had cleared, and what needed to be done lay ahead of her, now in clearer form. It wasn't just one or two things. There were so many things she didn't want to count them.

Though they'd wound up in conflict as two forces after Sachiko, Sachiko was gone now, and the Puk Faction was trying to force through the ceremony regardless. And since the reason Pfle had sought Sachiko was to interfere with the ceremony—she had been mistaken there, but there was no reason to tell Hamuel about that—from here on out, they could work together. Pfle had not heard about it even once since entering Magical Girl Resources, but the department was more or less under the jurisdiction of the Caspar Faction, and since the Caspar and Osk Factions were collaborating, then it was also not strange for Magical Girl Resources to work with the Osks. That was why they were together. She would have them ignore all the nasty things Deluge and Dark Cutie had done to those Shufflins. And as for Uluru, this wasn't the situation in which to challenge her for having been a member of the Puk Faction.

Hamuel was someone who would prioritize gain. And this *gain* was not for her faction, but for herself. She was the type who worked for a faction because its expansion benefited her. She was absolutely not overflowing with the spirit of self-sacrifice. That was plenty apparent after one exchanged a few words with her.

"All the staff of the Magical Girl Resources Department have gone over the data to make contact with individuals who seem useful," said Pfle. "I'd like you to incorporate them into your forces, myself in command included."

"You move quickly," Hamuel replied.

“I won’t tell you speed over care is best, but what can be done quickly should be. With the cooperation of the Inspection Department, we’ve also carried out checks to see if they are under Puk Puck’s spell. Since having their specialists handle matters such as these is…yes, since it’s quicker.”

“I see, I see.”

“I’m not asking that you remain in our debt, but we did spend quite a bit for their hire.”

“If you could put together an invoice, we will manage payment at a later date.”

“Splendid. And most importantly, don’t forget about Shadow Gale and Snow White.”

“Of course, of course.” The fact that Hamuel did not take this opportunity to say, *“I’ve heard that Shadow Gale is a member of your staff, but just what is your connection with Snow White?”* was a blessed lack of irritation.

“I would also like to share information,” said Pfle. “Since that’s necessary to coordinate our forces.”

“Yes, likewise,” Hamuel agreed.

“I’d also like to combine usable military assets and the abilities of magical girls, and magical items as well, if you have them.”

“How about we put that into writing and exchange documents?”

“That would be fine.”

“I’ll arrange for it immediately.”

“I’ve had this written up,” said Pfle. “Though it’s an informal summary, so it’s more like a set of memos, though.”

“No, no, it’s enough. Thank you very much.”

Pfle handed Hamuel a few sheets of report paper tied together with string. Hamuel accepted them politely with both hands, handing them to the diamond Shufflin to her side and ordering, “Make sure these are sent to Lady Lethe.”

Watching the diamond Shufflin strut off like an elite guard, Pfle thought, *The issue is whether I can save Mamori or not.* She smiled vacantly as if she were not thinking about anything of the sort, and Hamuel returned her own empty smile.

They discussed what would happen next. Intermingled with harmless chat, Pfle quietly slipped in more important matters, trying to draw out as much information as possible. Information was not simply numbers and data. Pfle observed absolutely

everything: Hamuel's manner and verbal tics, and even the fidget-like habits that came out without her being aware of them. Based on these, she read the workings of her mind, ascertaining how she received the subjects that Pfle brought up. She was a rather difficult magical girl to grasp, but gradually, her true character came clear to Pfle.

"Pardon me." Pfle turned her wheelchair 180 degrees on the spot. Dark Cutie was standing about three steps away. Her footsteps had made no sound, her presence had been invisible. Perhaps she saw this as enemy territory.

Pfle raised a palm toward Dark Cutie as she turned back to Hamuel. "This is Dark Cutie. She's a reliable magical girl."

Saying, "I've heard all about you," Hamuel moved to stand.

But Pfle restrained her with a hand, turning just her head to look at Dark Cutie. "Did something happen?"

Dark Cutie's expression was a little grim. If you weren't used to seeing her regularly, the difference there was so minute, you'd never notice it, but her expression had without a doubt turned in the negative direction. It was very rare for Dark Cutie to change her expression in front of Pfle. "I came because I heard you have business with me."

"Who said that?"

"A card soldier. A diamond."

"No, I never summoned you."

Before Pfle could finish saying that, Dark Cutie ran off, and a moment later, Pfle followed.

◇ Glassianne

She was currently forbidden to shift her vision to the ruins. Puk Puck had a fearsome magic: to steal your heart on your seeing her. And for better or for worse, Pfle's dramatic lament that "if you joined the enemy side, it would be like having our arms and legs ripped off" had stuck with Glassianne. It was rather intense, being forced to battle danger even on the back lines.

If they were to use Glassianne's magic in the ruins, then it would be with the utmost care and precaution, in tandem with on-site observation, so that there would be no danger. Glassianne didn't want her heart stolen by magic, either, and Glassianne going

to the enemy would be a problem for their side. It would be atrocious if they couldn't trust the reports of their monitoring eyes anymore, and even worse if she gave reports that would place the enemy at the advantage—that would cause them absolute devastation.

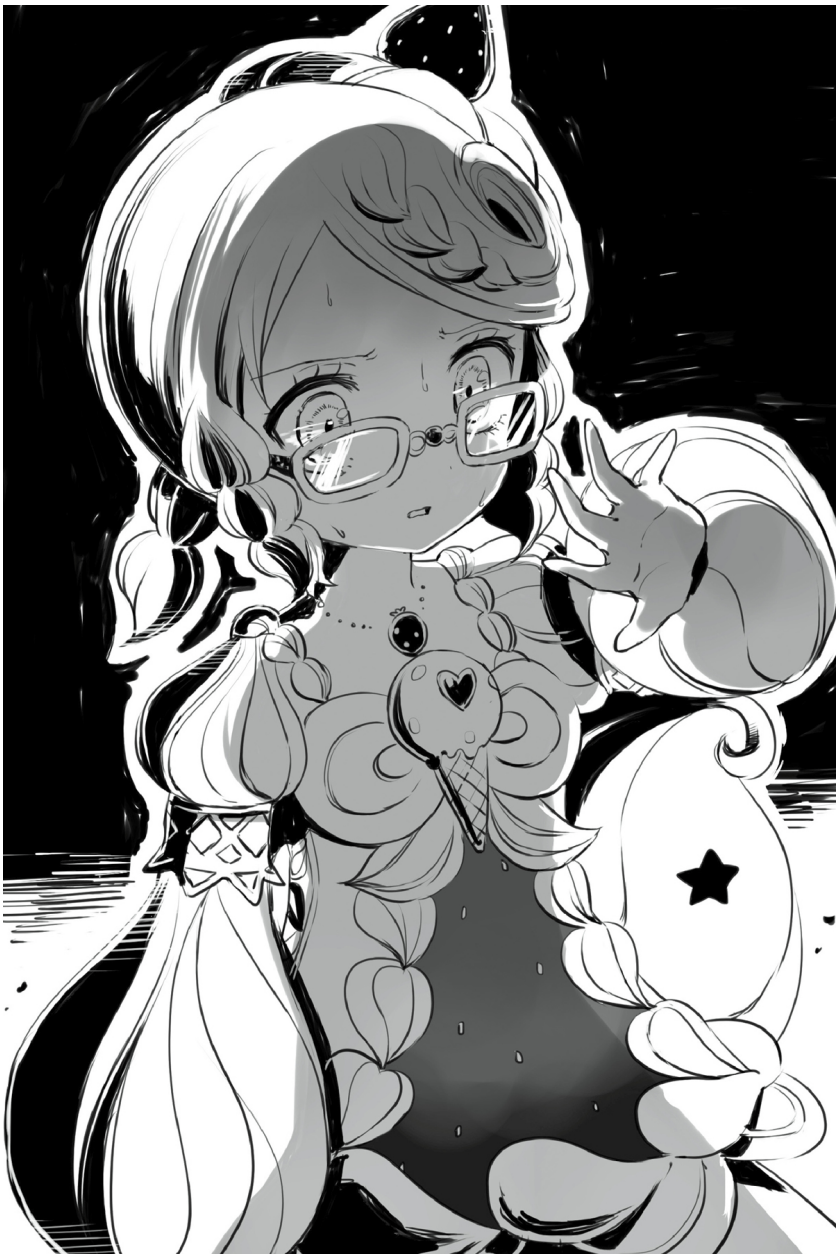
Glassianne did as she'd been ordered and did not look to the ruins, devoting herself to keeping watch over the spectator area, which was packed with magical girls and mages. Who'd notice if some member of the Puk Faction was among them, with the title of some department head? Glassianne's job was to investigate for any strange behavior.

She was continuing to check the area when she stopped halfway. There were card soldiers gathered around a tent—this tent, where Glassianne was resting. It was surrounded by card soldiers, all of whom were armed. Glassianne pushed herself into a sitting position, her right hand supporting her body, placing her open left hand over her face. Expression twisted in shock and fear, she watched the card soldiers march into the tent. Without moving her gaze from the soldiers, she quickly swapped the observation point of her magical glasses, checking what Dark Cutie and her boss were doing.

They were having a pleasant chat with the angel magical girl who was in the upper ranks of the Osk Faction. Dark Cutie was standing behind the boss, and the boss turned back.

That's not it.

It didn't seem as if they'd been betrayed by the Osks. If that were the case, the boss would have been captured before Glassianne, and there was no reason a strong fighter like Dark Cutie would be left to act freely, either. Had some other kind of accident happened?



She focused her field of vision around herself—not from her own perspective, but a bird's-eye view from above. There were a total of four club card soldiers circling her. They'd even brought their batons into the tent, making it awfully cramped. Their numbers were five, six, nine, and king.

Glassianne threw herself down, putting both hands on the ground. Rubbing her forehead into the tent floor, she yelled loudly, "Don't kill me! I don't want to die!" She belted it, using simple phrases that included words like *kill* and *die*. If anyone around heard, they might be startled and come over to see what was going on. Even if no one came, it would fluster the enemy. Someone loudly begging for their life caused more anxiety than someone just wailing and crying. Even if they'd come to kill her and nothing else, sometimes this would make them hesitate.

The four magical girls raised their clubs over Glassianne as she groveled on her knees. It didn't seem they were hesitating, but Glassianne could tell they were in a hurry, thinking they had to finish her off quick and get out of there. And Glassianne was exposing herself rather than resisting, another thing that made their movements sloppy.

If she was going to attack, then she'd start with the strong one first.

Right before the blow landed, she wrapped her arms around the king's ankles, pushing her right knee. The king fell back on her bottom, still keeping her hold on her club—but she should have let go. Glassianne circled to her right, and having that club in hand made the king's right arm slow, so Glassianne got it in a lock while simultaneously slamming her elbow into the bridge of the king's nose. She pulled in the enemy's left arm, restraining her torso with her legs, and, spinning herself around, she circled behind the king's back to strangle her. The other card soldiers raised their clubs, but they couldn't bring them down. The king's body was in between them and Glassianne. If she just kept squeezing the king's artery, she'd pass out in a few seconds, but in a battle among magical girls, a few seconds was too long. Twisting around, Glassianne wrenched off the king's shinbone. An instant later, she used the king's body to block the clubs that swung down at her, then crawled along the ground, sweeping the legs of the five out from under her, and

wrapped her arms around the five's knees to bring her down into the six, while Glassianne twisted around to jerk away from the nine's club.

No magical girl was used to fighting an enemy who kept her face to the ground. But Glassianne was used to fighting with her face down. Face toward the tent floor, using her glasses to perceive the whole battlefield, she moved like an insect or beast on all fours, attacking using openings created by the enemies not knowing how to attack when she was facing downward.

This was a little trick that would be useless as soon as the enemy got used to it, but it had never failed to be effective on the first attack.

When the five tried to get up, Glassianne kicked her down, twisting the ankle of the six to bend it backward. Picking the perfect moments, even Glassianne, who was only average in speed and strength for a magical girl, could destroy her enemies' joints. She held up the shin of the five to block the nine's club, and then, abandoning the five as she wailed and cradled her bent shin, she aimed for a corner of the tent, but the fallen six blocked her path. That being the case, Glassianne wasn't opposed to finishing this one off, making a feint to the right before grabbing the six's left arm, yanking it up under her own arm to break it off. She was expecting an attack from the nine next, but then nothing happened. Glassianne saw the nine running out of the tent, then looked at the five. The five held a round object in her right hand and in her left a round pin as she gasped in pain, tears running down her cheeks. It took Glassianne only a split second to realize the five was holding a magic grenade and a grenade pin, but it was already too late.

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

The grenade had blasted one whole tent to pieces. A number of the tents around had been blown away as well, and though there had been no deaths among the guests, a few were gravely injured. Somehow managing to drag her heavy feet, Hamuel went to Lethe. Hamuel was the only one who could report this thing she didn't want to report, after all. And sure enough, Lethe's lips twisted as she leaned back in her chair in an arrogant pose. Her attending Shufflin IIs also twitched, frightened by her elegant presentation of

displeasure.

"I've figured out what happened," Hamuel reported.

"What was it?"

"It was the Shufflin IIs who returned after scouting. They were charmed by Puk Puck, and it seems they received detailed instructions through their magical phones…"

"And then blew themselves up, eh."

"Yes. One of the members of Magical Girl Resources is dead. She and the four Shufflin IIs who were being controlled. The others have been captured."

"One from Magical Girl Resources?"

"A magical girl who used farseeing magic. I'm told her power was extremely convenient."

"So then they've blinded us."

"Well, yes. It seems what happened is that since we were exchanging a list of magical girls and magic to cooperate closely with Magical Girl Resources, the Shufflin IIs read it and reported it to Puk, which led to this."

Explaining it herself, Hamuel thought this was a terrible blunder. The efficacy of Puk Puck's magic was more immediate than she had imagined. So then did that mean that before, when she'd used it during meetings, it hadn't been at full power? Or had there been some opportunity for it to grow? Whatever the case, this was equivalent to letting the enemy invade, by Hamuel's own error. She had investigated the "guests" carefully, but she'd been careless about the Shufflin IIs, who were theirs. She'd overlooked how suspicious it was for them to be so frequently contacted on their magical phones.

"I knew it," said Lethe.

"What do you mean?" asked Hamuel.

"This isn't how Puk operates, eh. It's not playful." Lethe stood, smacking her folded fan in her right palm. "If she's not being playful, that means she has no time. She'll be trying to make the ceremony a success without expending any unnecessary time or effort."

"I'm sure you're right."

"So then we must hurry as well, eh. How far have the next level of scouts gone?"

"About halfway down the road to the ruins."

"We'll head out. And have them move ahead, too. If we catch

up on the way, then well enough, eh."

"Yes'm."

That was when a three of hearts ran up to Hamuel, whispering in her ear. Hamuel scowled.

"What's wrong?" Lethe asked her.

"We've captured an enemy soldier," said Hamuel. "It seems she's been questioned…"

"You may torture her or whatever you please. Forget about humanitarianism now."

"About that, well, though I have given no such orders, I couldn't say for certain there's no possibility it may have been done when certain individuals at the scene went out of control, so to speak."

"You're rather black-hearted, Hamuel."

"Oh no, I'm sure my heart is quite red. More importantly, a volunteer asked to do the questioning, so I tried letting her do it."

"Which torturer was it?"

"Well…it's the magical girl who left the Puk Faction."

◇ Uluru

It wasn't as if Uluru wanted to totally oppose Puk Puck. She just wanted to know what Puk Puck was really after. All Uluru had been told was the vague story that if they held the ceremony and activated the device, then it would all work out, and that had been enough to convince her, before. *Lady Puk is so amazing*, she'd thought with a bright smile. Now Uluru was full of doubt, unable to move forward. She didn't know if Puk Puck was really doing the right thing.

The magical girl who'd been captured by the card soldiers and dragged out before Uluru wasn't one she'd seen before. Was she some kind of mercenary? Her fluffy costume made of sponge material didn't look like it'd be strong in a fight. Uluru had been told that this girl had been captured after falling and getting stuck in a hole without even using her magic. That was too pathetic for a mercenary.

Uluru approached the sponge magical girl and brought her mouth close to her ear. "Be quiet. Keep the others around from noticing. Uluru's a spy. A magical girl from the Puk Faction."

Shocked, the sponge magical girl looked around restlessly, then fixed her gaze on Uluru and nodded. Uluru felt a little shocked that this girl trusted her. Uluru's being from the Puk Faction was a lie. And Uluru knew it was a lie, too. Clenching her right hand in a fist, she told herself not to let her mind wander.

"You can be honest with me and tell me everything," said Uluru. "You'll be speaking for Lady Puk's sake, too."

"O-okay."

"What's your name? What kind of magic do you use?"

"Magical Pongee. I can clean any mess with my magical sponge."

"Clean any mess? How do you fight with that?"

"No, I'm bad at fighting. But I'd finished my job on the device, and I had nothing else to do…so I said I wanted to go to the battlefield, so I could be even a tiny bit useful to Lady Puk."

"The device? You were assigned to device activation?"

"Yes. My job was to remove the talismans that were stuck to the device. I was told I just had to handle the device, so I don't know much about anything aside from that, but once I got the talismans off, I had no more work to do, so…"

"You know about the device? Did you hear about how it was going to be used?"

"Umm, I heard that magical girls would be sucked into the device, and they'd make it so they could live forever inside it. And then it'll keep creating tons of magical power. Once the device is activated, I'll get to go inside, too. And all the other magical girls will go in, too, and we'll have Lady Puk watching over us forever. Don't you think that's wonderful?" Magical Pongee said with a sparkling smile. Uluru felt awful.

"Undoing the seals, modifying the device, and holding the ceremony successfully is all really hard, so Lady Puk also said we might get stuck somewhere. But if that happens, we just have to use the contract. She said it'll make us really lucky, so that we can make the device work."

That was Sachiko's contract. Uluru nodded.

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

"Former Puk Faction?" said Lethe. "If we let someone like that do

the questioning, will we get information worth trusting?"

"It seems this is actually something we can place some faith in. The captured prisoner was originally meant to be focused entirely on the device, but her task ended quickly, and so, having nothing left to do, she headed out to fight," explained Hamuel.

"And that's how she got captured, eh? How foolish."

"When questioned about how Puk Puck would use the device, she said that magical girl who's good at modifying machines…the one Pfle mentioned, Shadow Gale, you know? It seems they'll have her alter it. And then, by taking magical girls into the device, they'll make it so it will generate magical power practically eternally."

"Oh-ho…"

"The research team was deeply impressed, going on about how it was an incredible, paradigm-shattering idea that overcomes the bounds of the magical framework."

"They need some good sense impressed into them with branding irons."

"Indeed."

"But how can you say you trust such information, eh?"

"There was that list you received from Pfle of magical girls whose whereabouts were unknown, right? When we compared that list with the methods of unsealing we got out of the prisoner, it all matches. And it's also consistent with that wild story about all magical girls becoming 'friends.' After all, Puk Puck would be showing affection for the magical girls from outside the device. Perhaps she's mistaken it for an aquarium."

Lethe lifted her fan to shade herself from the sun. The way the shadows fell over her face made her look terribly pale. Hamuel felt, as if for the first time, she'd seen Lethe act her apparent age, and she turned her own face down.

"You said this was information we can trust, eh?" said Lethe.

"Sadly, that is the case," Hamuel replied. "It was procured through magic."

"…Be sure to communicate this to everyone."

"Is that for the best? That may make some eager to flee."

"No matter. You may tell them our backs are against the wall. Morale is irrelevant for the Shufflin IIs, but tell the ones who were hired with money that their lives hang in the balance. If you threaten them and tell them becoming toys to Puk Puck…to *that* and wrung out eternally is a fate more painful than death, they'll

work a tad harder, eh."

◇ **Pfle**

"Puk Puck's goal is"—Hamuel's voice flew at them, saying they had learned just what sort of evil use the device would be put to. It wasn't bad to have a clear understanding that Puk Puck was unquestionably the enemy, to share among all this alliance of the willing and unwilling, *"We have to defeat her, or we're doomed."* With goals all across the spectrum, from money or status to ethics, this mass of rival teams was stuck in the same boat together for the time being, and it was correct strategy to arrange for them a common enemy they could not yield to, no matter what. It seemed this announcement caused a little confusion, but the Shufflins swiftly silenced those who made a fuss.

That was a plus. But it would in no way compensate for the minus of having lost Glassianne. The enemy's plan to carefully pinpoint Glassianne and finish her off had been made possible because the enemy had been aware of her existence. One of the Shufflin IIs who had become an enemy spy had gotten a furtive glance at the list of magical girls Pfle had handed over, and the enemy had used that to attack the person most worth eliminating. Glassianne had been unguarded, and although she had been comparatively lacking in combat skills, her magic had more tactical value than mere individual strength; it had strategic applications. Pfle would also have gone for Glassianne, if the roles had been reversed.

This was an extremely formidable foe. Sending some Shufflins back that were already controlled to say the others who had gone ahead weren't coming back had been a ploy that took advantage of their oversight—that was smart. Had Pfle simply underestimated an incarnation of one of the Three Sages, or was there someone else giving her ideas? The Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White, rose to mind, and Pfle drew her lips taut.

"Boss. Deluge is here," said Dark Cutie.

"Oh, thanks. Show her in."

Dark Cutie was the same as always in every respect, no changes. Ever since her anime had been aired, she had committed to expressionlessness, which some whispered was total

shamelessness. You got no sense at all that she felt sorrow or grief over the loss of her longtime comrade-in-arms, Glassianne, right after the loss of Micchan the Dictionary. Even Pfle couldn't tell from the outside how she dealt with it inside.

But as for Princess Deluge, switching places with Dark Cutie to come into the tent, Pfle could tell from the outside that nothing inside her had been dealt with. She was feeling lost. And Pfle knew why she was feeling lost.

"There was something I wanted to let you know," Pfle said.

"What is it?" Deluge wasn't exactly being rude, but her manner was curt. She did not think well of Pfle. And what Pfle was about to tell her would only upset her further. That was certain. Would she be enraged, or even murderous, or—

"We're right about to depart. We can't be the only ones being left behind. So let's get this done quickly. This is about the artificial magical-girl project, where you became a magical girl."

Deluge's expression changed. Her eyes bored into Pfle, and Pfle could see that inside her firmly closed lips she was clenching her teeth.

"I've just recovered the memories I'd lost," said Pfle. "It seems I was funding the artificial magical-girl project."

◇ **Princess Deluge**

Without even the time to think, she moved. Her right hand thrust out her spear, pushing it up toward Pfle's throat. The surrounding temperature dropped, and frost fell onto Pfle's curls, dyeing those parts white.

"What is the meaning of this?" Deluge demanded.

"I was providing money for the artificial magical-girl development project that was being carried out under the initiative of someone named Lapis Lazuline. The project was an attempt to independently develop the magical-girl technology the Magical Kingdom monopolizes. As magical girls, the Magical Kingdom essentially has our hearts in its grasp. Negotiating a single item is beyond consideration—we can't even have a seat at the same table. And so to get out of that—"

"That's not what I'm asking."

"Fair enough." Giving the trident a weary look, Pfle turned on

the magical phone in her lap. A hologram popped up, and Deluge's mouth opened slightly.

"Fal…?" said Deluge.

"Deluge, long time no see, pon," Fal replied.

"You were lying to me, too?"

"No, pon. And Pfle wasn't technically lying to you, either, pon." Fal told Deluge about how Pfle had had her memories about the artificial magical girls removed in order to avoid investigation. And then Shadow Gale had made the arbitrary decision to hand those memories to Snow White, and Fal had just returned them, on the condition that Pfle save Snow White.

Fal said that Pfle hadn't been deceiving her, but that didn't matter anymore. Deluge squeezed the trident in her right hand tight, and Fal cried, "Stop, pon! Even if you kill Pfle now, it's not like it'll solve anything, pon. You can't lose sight of your goal, pon. You need to be using Pfle right now, pon."

Deluge eased the tension in her right arm.

Pfle let out a breath, then pushed aside the trident points, which had returned to normal temperature without Deluge realizing. "Thanks, Fal," said Pfle. "I share your opinion, but saying so myself would have amounted to nothing more than begging for my life."

"It's not like Fal wanted to save you, pon."

"That reminds me that you had a similar stance back in the game, didn't you?"

"Fal doesn't remember, pon."

"No matter, then." Pfle's expression tensed as she faced Deluge once more. The Pfle Deluge knew would be either laughing or smiling, looking somehow amused regardless of the situation, but all sense of pleasure or irony had faded, and tension seeped from her every pore. Her fists, laid on her lap, were clenched tight, with visible definition in red and white. "Deluge. I can show you the research documents on artificial magical girls, and I can also supply you with all necessary items, including the drug you need for transforming, maintaining transformation, and Luxury Mode. I can offer you complete support."

The angle of the trident in Deluge's right hand gradually lowered until the trident's central point touched the floor with a *clank*.

"I also have information. And I know the self-serving rationale

behind why you were all brought together, and why such awful things happened to you. I can tell you that as well."

Deluge's clenched teeth creaked. She glared at Pfle, who responded with a serious look. "If there's anything else you want, then tell me. I will arrange for what you seek."

What did Deluge want? What did she need? She couldn't think, and the words wouldn't come out. And she was afraid of the words that wouldn't come out. She doubted herself, wondering if she was acting without a clear goal in mind.

Pfle looked steadily up at Deluge, then lowered her eyes. "I won't say I've never felt any resentment about Shadow Gale's kidnapping, but it's pointless to take you to task for that now. The one who should bear the blame is the one who used you. It was someone I know."

Deluge pointed her trident up again. Deluge took a step closer to Pfle and leaned her face in close. She heard Fal cry, "Deluge!" but she didn't try to figure out what the mascot was trying to say.

"What are you talking about?" Deluge demanded.

"I just told you, didn't I? The magical girl who was once known as Lapis Lazuline. The one I funded. There was a woman who played the role of your teacher, wasn't there? That was her."

There had been a teacher who had made all the Pure Elements —except for Prism Cherry—into magical girls, the one who'd told them to fight Disrupters. Ms. Tanaka was her name. Shortly before the Pure Elements had been attacked, she'd stopped showing up, and they'd all worried about her. Until Pfle had pointed it out, that woman had practically popped right out of Deluge's head—even though she should have been the first person to consider.

"You aren't aware of any strange thoughts or feelings, or having been guided in any way?" asked Pfle.

The impulses that Deluge had just recently noticed were overly intense. Plus, it was those directions she'd received via paper slips that had led her to see the Pure Elements in their final moments. Her quest for revenge had begun at that point.

"And that blue magical girl—the current incarnation of Lapis Lazuline," Pfle went on, "can extract memories and feelings through candies she makes."

Deluge's trident fell to the floor, making a surprisingly light sound. "Bluebell…?"

"She is the selfsame apprentice Lazuline I know. I'm sure that

through skillful removal of her own memories and emotions, she could even become someone else."

Deluge picked up her trident, then spun around, meaning to run out of the tent, but Pfle's remark of, "It seems Bluebell—Lazuline—has already fled. I had them search for her, but she's already gone," stopped her in her tracks, and she turned back.

Pfle was looking at Deluge with such seriousness that Deluge's breath caught in her throat. "I don't know what Lazuline was trying to do, but I can imagine. Making you a terrorist to have you kidnap Shadow Gale to use me as she pleases. Operating as a third power between the Puk and Osk Factions, striking blows at both sides in a ploy to have them take each other out. That's what she's doing." Pfle paused a moment and narrowed her eyes. "She tends to despise not only the Magical Kingdom, but magical girls themselves. I couldn't divine what's gone on inside her, but the one thing I do know is that she'll do anything to accomplish her goals. You and I were both used by Lazuline. And by that same token, I'm trying to use you now. However, as Fal has just said, you should also use me." Pfle proffered her right hand.

Overwhelmed, Deluge pulled her right foot a step back. But then, unable to accept that she'd been cowed, she took her trident in a reverse grip and stabbed it into the ground. "What a whole lot of selfish monologuing."

"Yes…that's exactly what this is," Pfle replied.

The two magical girls stared each other down—Pfle gently, and Deluge with a glare. Fal, stuck between them, interjected some static before somersaulting in the air and erasing his hologram.

Deluge had been deceived and used, and by the time she'd escaped danger, all her friends had been killed, and then she'd been deceived and used some more. She raised a clenched fist, then swung it down with all her strength on the butt of the trident she'd thrust into the ground. Her fist hammered it into the earth, burying its tines deep.

Just how much—*how much*—had she been deceived?

"I'm not falling for any more tricks," said Deluge.

"Right."

"I'm going to use you."

"That's fine by me."

Deluge pulled out her trident, and a scatter of earth clumps rained down over Pfle.

CHAPTER 7
STOP THIS FINGER

◇ **Shadow Gale**

It wasn't that the work was not progressing, but you couldn't quite say it was moving along smoothly. It would be most accurate to say it was making slow progress. This turn of phrase lacked the positive inflection of *"We're making progress, even if it's just bit by bit,"* while including a generous helping of *"Progress is so slow, all we're producing is irritation and a sense of helplessness."*

What they had to do was clear. Shadow Gale had to modify the device into precisely what Puk Puck had in mind. Unfortunately, problems were piling up along the way, and the magical girls had to solve each and every one of them.

The first obstacle was the talismans stuck on the surface of the device. Using magic to contaminate a target from afar, they dirtied the magical talismans, which would make anyone who touched them or even looked at them fall asleep, and then, once that mess could be perceived as garbage, they removed it with magic that would clean up any garbage.

The next thing to get in their way was the thick armor. The device had no openings or screw holes, so they had to dig into its smooth and slippery body. What's more, since there was a magical barrier under the armor, they had to stop digging into it before they got that deep. The method they tried was to have a magical girl with strong claws scratch at the outer armor, peeling at it right to the point of almost touching the barrier. Each time her claws, which could rip through steel or titanium, were overcome by the toughness of the armor, cracking with blood flying as they hit their limit, the magical nail artist would restore them, enabling the task of grinding and scratching away to resume.

They had to clear each stage of the process one by one in order, while in the meantime, the other parts—in other words, the other magical girls who had been selected to access the device—were made to wait. Every task was a specialized one that used magic, so others weren't able to help. Since those who had finished their tasks were left at loose ends, some had been heading out to the battlefield of their own accord. But they apparently really dragged the others down, and so Puk had told them, "Puk's really thankful for the sentiment," and had gently begun forbidding them from going out.

The work did grind to a halt at points. Cold looks rained down on the magical girls who paused in their tasks, or on the whole group. Regardless, rushing through things wouldn't produce good results. They were absolutely forbidden to focus solely on speed, rush through it, and wind up with an unsatisfactory result. Right now, they had the talismans removed, and they'd somehow peeled off the outer armor that coated the device, reaching the stage where they were trying to input a password to undo its giant lock.

It had been tough to get this far, but the trouble posed by the lock and password was huge. The lock used a magical password that hadn't been made to let you unlock it: A passcode of twenty digits out of a few hundred million possible letters, numbers, and symbols was replaced randomly every few seconds. If not for the manual Puk Puck had given them, they wouldn't even have known how to start deciphering it. First, they used magic to give the device an artificial personality. Then they used a different magic to make its mind foggy, so it would repeat a certain pattern, and from there they just had to input the password at the right moment, but that wasn't going very well.

Pfle had asked Shadow Gale to modify machines daily. There had been troublesome orders and requests for solutions she'd never managed before. She had experience going through multiple all-nighters to complete tasks, but she'd never been very motivated in her work. Now things were different. She was burning with a sense of purpose. She had absolutely no desire to slack off. And not only Shadow Gale—all the others were the same. It wasn't as if they liked each other, but they had a shared goal in their hearts as they worked to get the device going. So that the great Puk Puck would be happy with them, so that she would smile at them, and, with luck, so that she would pet their heads, they were frugal with time but not labor as they pushed toward their goal.

Yes, they were enthused about the task. There was unmistakably enthusiasm, but even so, the atmosphere was gradually growing stale. Despite the high ceiling and wide space, this was still an enclosed room with no place to run. The massive device took up space, sitting there heavily without even the slightest diffidence. They'd all only just met for the first time that day or the day before, and they were putting their heads together to work endlessly on a job that kept stuttering to a halt over and over, so of course the atmosphere wasn't amicable. Some made stinging comments over the errors of others, some snorted, some clicked tongues, and others made more blatant disparagements.

Perhaps it was the atmosphere affecting her, but even Shadow Gale, whose turn to work hadn't come yet, was getting annoyed. The irritation filling the space continued to swell, increasing in size like a balloon, passing the point where sticking it with a pin would make it pop. If things went on like this, it was going to explode even without a needle—and right then, two magical girls appeared at the entrance.

"You're all working so hard!"

It was as if a ray of sun shone down on just that spot. A comfortable warmth like a patch of sun in spring and a perfume that tickled the nose and brought to mind fruits from a southern land radiated out from the entrance, and Shadow Gale remembered the concept of happiness. So there was something so good, someone so good in this world.

The magical girls stood up from their tasks all at once, and when Puk Puck restrained them with both hands, saying, "It's okay, it's okay," they sat down again. But none of them returned to their work. They all gazed upon Puk Puck, enraptured. The irritation that had been continuously growing was all gone. It hadn't withered and disappeared—it had been made so that it had never been there in the first place.

Snow White accompanied Puk Puck as she entered the room, and under her direction, a whole line of Puk Puck's magical girls followed. They carried large digital screens, batteries, cords, and cardboard boxes, avoiding the device as they placed the screens and batteries all over the place and connected them with extension cords. The magical girls who'd been working to activate the device watched in silence. Looking at their faces, you could tell they were all confused.

Snow White stepped toward Puk Puck, bringing her lips close to her ear to whisper something. That gesture alone was enough to make Shadow Gale jealous, but she didn't let it show on her face, just squeezing her fists in her lap and keeping her emotions in check.

Puk Puck smiled and nodded, then faced the device repair team. "This is a present from Puk."

They decorated a giant TV screen that was bigger than Shadow Gale was tall with rings made out of origami paper. Then, when Puk Puck clapped her hands, the power on everything turned on at once. Color gradually rose on the black screens, and Puk Puck appeared. Puk Puck was there on every single monitor, singing songs and dancing.

"Puk figured you guys would be lonely, so Puk decided to show this video to cheer things up. Now you can remember Puk and work hard!"

The magical girls all applauded with joy on their faces. Even Snow White and those who'd been setting up the screens clapped and praised Puk Puck. She was cutely bashful, gazing at the ground with flushed cheeks.

"Um, and Puk's brought a bunch of other things, too." And cans of cola and bags of potato chips were distributed to all the people there.

As everyone was eating the snacks with relish as they worked, Puk Puck scooted up to Shadow Gale's side. "You're in charge of the finishing touches and activation, right, Shadowy Sis?"

Savoring the honor of being the one of all the many magical girls present whom Puk Puck had specially addressed, with a cracking voice, she replied, "Yes."

"Then here." Puk Puck offered her a single sheet of paper. Numerous items were listed out on this letter-size paper, with boxes for check marks. It had to be some kind of a survey, or a contract. "So anyway, this is a premium contract. You hold on to it, Shadowy Sis. If Puk contacts you, then you'll be using it, so take good care of it, 'kay? You can't lose it."

"Yes. I understand."

"You won't necessarily be the one to use it. Puk'll make sure to tell you who'll be using it once the time comes. If you get stuck somewhere, we might wind up using it then. If that happens, Puk'd be glad if you came to ask before using it. You're not allowed to use

it without permission, 'kay?"

"Yes. I understand." Shadow Gale pulled out her notebook and wrote that down to prevent even the smallest chance she might forget. Seeing that, Puk Puck smiled with satisfaction. It was a smile that would melt the brains of those who saw it into utter enchantment. Of course, Shadow Gale's brain was also enchanted.

Even after Puk Puck left, the screens continued to display her image. The girls focused single-mindedly on the device with no further twists or tangles. Puk Puck pacified their irritation and anger and heightened their morale, and their sense of superiority and purpose in working for Puk Puck, knowing that if they didn't do this, no one else would, welled up endlessly. The difficulties where they'd been stuck got resolved as if there'd never been a problem in the first place, and each accomplishment led right to the next.

The gifts from Puk Puck had gotten everything pointed in the right direction. *This is exactly what makes her Puk Puck, that's exactly why she's Puk Puck,* Shadow Gale thanked Puk Puck and the gods who had led her to Puk Puck.

◇ **Puk Puck**

Once they were done setting out the screens, Puk Puck hurried to her post. Originally, she'd meant to leave the job of placing the screens to her friends, but when they'd been preparing the equipment to take into the device sanctum, Snow White had advised Puk Puck that she should go there in person.

"It appears your magic's attenuation rate is higher than usual for the parts who are engaged in the most stressful jobs, Lady Puk," Snow White said. "I've received reports that at this rate, it will affect their work."

"So you mean they won't be friends anymore?" Puk asked. "Puk doesn't want that."

"If we can maintain a constant state of maximum effect for your spell, that should make their work the most efficient. With your magic, it doesn't have to be you personally… Even an image of you will have the same effect. Let's leave some of the screens we brought to play a video of you on loop, Lady Puk. Fortunately, there are plenty of your videos on user-uploaded video sites."

“Ohh, that makes sense. So then should Puk ask them to set that up?”

“If you give them the screens personally, I think that will motivate them even more. Our accomplishing this goal and activating the device is ultimately up to their efforts. Let’s treat them as well as possible.”

Snow White’s suggestion seemed like a very good idea. If they got the device running, then everyone would become Puk Puck’s friend. If they failed to make the device work, all the things they’d been working on would all have been for nothing. She didn’t want that.

“So then let’s do what you say, Snowy Sis,” said Puk.

“Thank you very much.”

When Puk Puck came in, the color returned to the faces of the magical girls who’d been like dead people. Their expressions all sparkled with joy nonstop, they all moved with more energy, and Puk Puck could tell they were pressing forward as a single unit toward the goal of activating the device.

It was a really good thing she’d done as Snow White said.

“No, thank you, Snowy Sis,” Puk told her. “After this, Puk’ll make you pancakes as thanks.”

“Oh no…it’s nothing much,” Snow White replied. “I want to work for your sake, Lady Puk.”

Snow White was really doing a good job. On her advice, Puk Puck had sent back some of the Shufflins who’d recently become friends. She’d periodically contacted those girls through their magical phones, having them work for her in the enemy camp, getting them to tell her important information and stuff. And so she’d acquired information on the magical girls in the Osk Faction, and, of those, Puk Puck had selected the one with a farseeing ability, which she thought was the magic she most didn’t want the Osk Faction having, and said bye-bye to her. She really would have rather made friends, but she couldn’t be selfish here.

By combining their ideas, Snow White and Puk Puck had put together a single wonderful plan, and it had been a success. Puk Puck wouldn’t have been able to come up with something like that alone. She wondered if there were any other fun ideas, anything that might please her. That Snow White enabled her to carry out things like this made Snow White seem scary, but also reliable.

“Okay, Snowy Sis. Puk is going out on watch again.”

“Thank you for your efforts.”

“Yep, yep.”

Puk Puck going out on watch was another idea that would never have been thought up if it was just her. Puk Puck would add slight tweaks to Snow White’s ideas, making them even more wonderful and sparkly.

“I finished picking out your escort,” said Snow White.

“We’ll do our best together,” Puk said.

“We’re counting on you.”

“Uh-huh, Puk should just do her best to stop them, right? But what about you, Snowy Sis?”

“If, by some odd chance, anyone comes into the ruins…” There was a whoosh as Snow White spun her weapon around and readied it in her right hand. “Then I will handle them.”

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

They went through the gates and started down the road along the narrow ravine bottom that led to the ruins. From here, if you ran along this winding path for ten kilometers, you’d arrive at the entrance. With the legs of a magical girl, it was far faster than taking a car.

Their march sped up suddenly. The rather relaxed atmosphere, exemplified by the exchange of business cards and small talk, had vanished, and now the air around them was sharp, saying, *“We have to keep moving or we’ll die, we have to fight or we’ll die, if we lose we’ll die, if we let them activate the device we’ll die.”* This was now beyond issues like, *“If the Puk Faction activates the device, they’ll take control of leadership”* or *“Interests will go to their side.”* The activation of the device would rob the magical girls of their own being. A life more miserable than death, one of living as livestock awaited them.

Everyone sharing the same feelings and goal made them faster. Of course, there was no point in only being fast. Pairing that speed with caution was precisely what made it meaningful.

The mascot Fal’s magical-girl radar streamlined this process immensely. It really bumped up their resistance to surprise attacks and increased their speed by just as much. The ruts in the road told them the enemy had come down here in vehicles, but their forces couldn’t be casually taking cars to pursue them. Hamuel had the

Shufflin IIs take the lead, ordering them to trample any traps they found, while the other magical girls raced at full speed behind the suicide corps of hearts.

When they'd almost reached the ruins, they found the column of trucks the Puk Faction had taken there abandoned on the road, blocking their way through the narrow ravine. Past here, they would come out into a large open area surrounded by steep cliffs, and they had to go through the entrance on the opposite end to get into the ruins.

Swaying in her palanquin, Lethe gave out orders. "Ensure those trucks are removed without delay."

"We do have to investigate them, just in case. It's possible they could explode upon approach," Hamuel pointed out.

"Then get it done quickly."

It took time to make sure the trucks were nothing more, and all the while, Lethe's mood was steadily worsening.

"They're just trucks," she said.

"Yes, indeed, they are just trucks," Hamuel replied.

"So then have them pass over the roofs. To cover all our bases, it should be enough to remove only the tires."

"Oh, that's a good idea. Well then, let's go with that."

The diamond Shufflin IIs all got together to lift the trucks with jacks and remove the tires. If the enemy had left the trucks here to buy them time, then Hamuel was forced to acknowledge that they had served their purpose. Despite her irritation, Hamuel told the Shufflin IIs to pass over, under, or around the trucks.

The Shufflin IIs used rocks to make impromptu stairs, using them to pass over the roofs of the trucks before finally arriving at the entrance to the open space in front of the ruins.

Before they entered the vast circular space that lay before the ruins, the mascot Fal did a pass to check for enemies and told them there was just one magical girl sitting all alone in front of the ruins. That was probably Puk Puck.

Hamuel had a heart Shufflin II sneakily peek out from behind a rock, and when she checked the basin area in front of the ruins, she forgot herself and went running off into the ruins and didn't come back. This basically confirmed that the magical girl out there was Puk Puck. Since before their forces had entered the ravine, Shufflin IIs had returned from scouting already controlled, leading to casualties, so they were treating Puk Puck's magic with the utmost

caution. They couldn't push forward thoughtlessly.

The circular space was about the same size as the ruins. In other words, to attack from the basin entrance to the ruins entrance, you would have to reach a distance of two miles. What was more, there was the added handicap of not being able to look at Puk Puck.

Hamuel ordered the Shufflin II construction team to widen the road, creating a garrison space at a location not in the line of sight from the ruins. She drew the long, endless line of the forces forward into this space and did a roll call to organize everyone. But no matter how she arranged this unit, simply attacking head-on would only decrease their numbers while increasing the enemy's. She had to come up with a strategy to eliminate Puk Puck.

If any sentient living thing could be charmed by Puk Puck's magic, then Hamuel should use a machine that lacked sentience. It was a simplistic but straightforward resolution to the issue. First, Hamuel sent in some small tanks that operated on auto, but they were destroyed mercilessly by the simplest of attacks: Puk Puck throwing a rock. Reports said the tanks had failed to make even a single hit, and Puk Puck had evaded every single one. According to the mascot, which continued to monitor with his radar, Puk Puck had moved incredibly rapidly. You didn't even need to think back to Grim Heart—Hamuel knew an incarnation of one of the Three Sages would be exceptional in terms of pure physical ability.

Hamuel called off the sortie by bombing drones. It was a bad idea to use explosives too close to the ruins. Causing a landslide to bury the enemy would also carry the possibility of damaging the ruins. The same went for an attack with fire or water. Hamuel clenched her jaw. There wasn't even a second to spare. She didn't even know if they had time or not. It would be tough if machines weren't useful, but she had to find a solution anyway.

She had the spade Shufflin IIs line up in a row to all throw their spears at once. Even if they couldn't see the enemy, they could rely on numbers and bet that one or two shots would hit. And if they didn't, they'd try a second or third time. But that plan was called off when the situation immediately turned to disaster: The moment their spears were thrown, the enemy ran into the ruins, so none of them hit, while on their end, since they were trying to avoid looking at the enemy, Puk Puck's stones hit them at a maddening pace. It just resulted in the pointless sacrifice of the spades on the

throwing team and the hearts playing tank.

Aside from that one time Puk Puck ran back into the ruins temporarily, she never moved from her spot. She wasn't walking, running, or jumping, but simply holding down the fort. She went back inside just once before the main force led by Lethe arrived, and then immediately came out again, and she continued to play sentry the whole time after that.

Lethe sat down in a folding chair, assuming the pose of command. Sitting there alone with everyone around her carrying rocks and the sound of pickaxes ringing, she looked like a director at a construction site.

"It doesn't seem to be going well, eh," she said.

"Well, I suppose not," Hamuel agreed.

"What is Pfle doing?"

While privately surprised that Lethe's mind was on Pfle, Hamuel didn't let that show as she replied, "She's consolidating the mercenary forces that Magical Girl Resources gathered. Well, it seems she's working very hard. That's something to be thankful for."

"What sort of magical girl do you think that one is, eh?"

"Not a very good one. Rumor has it the Osk Faction had her estate attacked to create a pretext for searching it, but nothing came up, in the end. The reports concluded that something *should* have come up, however, so, taking that into consideration, she must have prepared for the search somehow. And someone who would do that is without question no good."

"That does sound reasonable."

Pfle wouldn't let others grasp her, and then she would probe others in a manner that wouldn't let them realize what she was doing. Pfle was still an unknown to Hamuel, but she did sort of think that if you might ask whether she remained out of Pfle's grasp, the answer was probably no.

Someone who was hard to grasp would either be incredibly incompetent or someone of capabilities beyond Hamuel's measure—one of those two. Since a magical girl who had risen to the position of department head could never be incompetent, she would be the latter.

"But even if she's no good, we must make use of her now," said Hamuel.

"What are her troops doing now?" Lethe asked.

“They’re on standby behind the trucks.” In an attempt to word things in a way that would sound good, Hamuel continued with, “I’m having them keep watch,” but she didn’t actually have the right to use Pfle’s forces at will. That was just the last place she’d seen them. Since she had the Shufflin IIs watching them under pretext of guarding them, anything extreme was unlikely, but even as an ally, Pfle gave Hamuel a different set of anxieties.

Lethe smacked her own forehead with her fan. “What a lot of hassles, eh.”

“Indeed.”

“And she’s said to spare not only Shadow Gale, but Snow White as well.”

“Well, we’re having her contribute enough to make that promise to her.”

“Of course, I will make an effort to keep that promise,” Lethe said. “However, no matter how much effort is made, one cannot entirely eliminate accidents. This Shadow Gale person in particular seems to be important to the activation of the device. If it turns out that her elimination means the device won’t work, then some hotheaded types may well act without permission.” Lethe flicked her gaze around the area, then lowered her voice. “Form an assassination squad with an ace of clubs at the head.”

“…Yes’m.”

“I’m told direct teleportation into the ruins is unfeasible.”

“I sounded out a number of experts in teleportation techniques,” Hamuel added, “but they’re all loath to do it. It seems the location is too unique. I was told it would require supernatural abilities of spatial perception.”

“So then we must somehow get around Puk.”

Being forced to go up against Puk Puck herself was what was causing such a struggle. If it weren’t Puk Puck but some other magical girl, they could deal with her more easily. Another magical girl—if they were to remove the magical girls whom Puk Puck had gathered for the ceremony, it would become impossible to activate the device. Though Hamuel wasn’t enthusiastic about this plan, if it came down to it, she couldn’t be calling such measures abominable or whatnot. If her side failed, everything was over.

“Continue the frontal attack as well, of course,” said Lethe. “Or have you run out of ideas?”

“Oh no, don’t worry. The assembly of the magically enhanced

auditory weapon and the directional energy weapon is complete."

It might even be said that their various tactics thus far had been buying time to use these. First, they'd pin down Puk Puck's position by using the mascot's enemy radar, and then, by attacking with sound waves, they'd damage her inner ears. Next, they'd focus energy using the directional energy weapon to form a high-temperature force field to fry her. The nice thing about these two weapons was that their attacks were invisible to the eye. Even with the physical capabilities of a Sage incarnation, she wouldn't be able to see them to dodge them.

The issues with the weapons were that experiments had not succeeded in producing more compact versions and that they still took a lot of time to outfit and assemble. But those problems were about to be resolved. A total of three units of diamond Shufflins were working like mad, assembling the two weapons on top of trucks.

A suicide corps of heart Shufflins had been put together with the strict order to protect the weapons with their lives if any stones were thrown at them, and they were positioned in front of them.

Based on their earlier failures, they had calculated the force of Puk Puck's throws. She threw so hard, you could hardly believe she was just throwing rocks, but it was possible to resist them for five minutes, if you lined up enough heart Shufflin IIs. And five minutes would be enough.

They set out the two weapons on the platforms of the trucks: One looked like giant speakers, the other like a giant parabolic antenna. Hamuel positioned upper heart ranks on the front lines. Rolling the trucks along at the speed of the hearts marching with shields raised, they brought the weapons to the entrance of the basin area.

Now, finally, Puk Puck was over. When Hamuel made the call, the switches were pressed—and that instant, all the heart Shufflin IIs were blasted away, and both weapons were destroyed in succession. Hamuel received the report that a high-speed aerial body had been fired from the ruins and that Puk Puck was no longer the only magical girl at the ruins entrance, but before she could tell the troops how to respond, there was a second bombardment. The trucks were shattered, the earth was gouged out, things were destroyed one after another. All the magical girls scrambled back from the basin entrance in a panic.

◇ Pfle

Since they were helpless in the face of the bombardment at the basin entrance, the allied forces pulled back their front line. This made it even more difficult for them to attack. Whatever they would shoot or throw, they had to make it to the entrance first to do it. But if they stood there, then they fell under fire.

The mood was only getting worse. Hamuel and Lethe were doubtless feeling irritated. They were on edge because they had to strike right now, but things weren't going well. Now that the Puk Faction's goals were clear, this was no time for complacent talk or standing around. The enemy's plan to protect the ruins' entrance by mainly using Puk Puck and having other magical girls provide

supporting fire was working favorably. As for the Osk Faction, things were much less favorable.

The Osks would most likely shift to wilder and more extreme methods. They didn't know how much time was left, so their side was all impatience. But the issue at hand was what form that shift in tactics would take. There was no way Lethe would not be considering that ignoring the hard target of Puk Puck to go for the soft targets—Shadow Gale and the others working to activate the device—was the best idea. Pfle would have to act to prevent that from happening.

The right moment for Pfle to take action was close at hand—the sort of moment when their side was on edge and ready to flee, one where she could take advantage of the confusion to take drastic action.

Pfle gave instructions. She ordered a magical girl who could create metallic items, Metallie, to make a "shell" for a giant bomb. Metallie could only make simple items, so she couldn't construct a complex explosive. All she could do was pack it with basic black powder.

"What should I do with this?" Metallie asked.

"Roll it into a position that can be seen from the ruins," Pfle told her.

"They won't get mad at me?"

"You need only pick it up again immediately."

Metallie would present to Puk Puck a giant bomb that was purely for show—it would look like nothing other than a massive explosive. It might seem as if the Osk Faction were trying to use that bomb to blow up the whole of the ruins and the device along with them. The destruction of the device was an absolute taboo for the Osk Faction, which was why they hadn't tried to go straight to destroying it, even knowing they might be absorbed by it. However, Puk Puck didn't know that. She could interpret this bomb situation however she liked—as the result of a foreign element acting of its own accord or of Lethe finally being pushed to desperate measures.

If Puk Puck made a move first, that was just what Pfle wanted.

◇ Uluru

They'd come up with various offenses, but none of them appeared

to be going well. They'd attacked again and again, only to be driven back. So Uluru thought as hard as she could. But she couldn't come up with any good plan. No matter how she thought and thought, she never figured out anything.

She was irritated. She understood why—because she'd learned what Puk Puck was trying to do. Magical Pongee had said Puk Puck was trying to suck all magical girls into the device and turn them into energy. Originally, Uluru would have nodded along, saying, *"If Lady Puk is doing it, it's got to be right,"* but she couldn't do that now. She found herself thinking that she didn't want to get sucked in just to become energy. But if she did something about that, that would mean betraying the Puk Faction.

If she didn't want to get sucked into the device, then betrayal was her only option. Knowing that made her irritated, and she took it out on Mana.

"Why have these guys been doing nothing but messing things up! Are they even trying?!" Uluru snapped.

"Well, but—" Mana's eyelids trembled slightly. Halfway into that remark, she looked up, raising her right palm to Uluru as she continued to rage on, while with her left hand, she stuck up a finger and brought it to her lips. "Quiet. Can't you hear something?"

Uluru listened carefully. All she could hear was the clamor around them: pickaxes hitting rocks, people talking, machines operating, the clacking sound of plastic hitting plastic, and aside from that—Uluru lifted her chin. She'd thought it was the sound of the wind, but it wasn't.

"Singing…? That's—" It was muffled and coming from a good distance away, so it sounded intermittent and cracked, but as she listened more—it was a melody. Multiple voices united in song. They were singing in chorus. Uluru put a hand up to her ear. She'd heard it before. "…It's Puk's Choir."

Mana gave her a questioning look. "Puk's Choir? What's that?"

"They're a group that's always practicing singing. Whenever Puk sings, like for someone's birthday, or when they're making a video to upload online, they do the chorus."

Another voice joined in with the intermittent chorus. This one was closer than the crackly voices in the background. It had a beautiful, sonorous sound. Uluru had heard it before—sweet and light—just hearing it would make you feel like you'd rise to heaven and melt away in fascination, the whisper of an angel—

“The trucks!” someone yelled. When Uluru looked over, she saw the trucks were vibrating slightly. Their engines were on. What had happened? A card soldier was dazedly looking into a truck window. There was something shining, illuminating her face.

“Don’t look in the trucks—toward where you can hear the singing! There’s videos of Puk playing on the car navigation!” Uluru exclaimed.

The card soldier slowly turned her face toward Uluru and Mana. Her expression was one of utter bliss. She slowly brought her hands away from her ears, and with her club-like weapon in one hand, she raised it—

“Get down on the spot, or Lady Puk’ll die!” Uluru yelled.

Since Mana wouldn’t see Puk Puck dying as a problem, even if she believed Uluru’s lie, she wouldn’t get down. Only the card soldier went down, and the other card soldiers kept her pinned to the ground.

Disturbances were rising elsewhere as well. The card soldiers who had seen the video were attacking other soldiers, and the rest of the soldiers were trying to restrain the rampaging card soldiers, when—*bam*, Uluru heard a loud sound. She automatically turned her head toward it, but Mana leaped on her and blocked her, and she couldn’t look over.

“Don’t look! That sound came from a screen!” Mana cried.

The enemy had tried to draw attention with that loud noise to get more people watching. The commotion grew even bigger, and all over the place, everyone was starting to fight among themselves. Hearing a voice in her head telling her to destroy the screens, Uluru kept her eyes averted as she struck the butt of her rifle into a screen.

“Puk Puck is taking advantage of the confusion to come this way!” someone yelled. It was a voice she’d heard before.

“Everyone, head for the ruins!”

She knew that voice sounded familiar—it was Pfle. At her cry, the magical girls who’d been on standby behind the trucks raced out all at once. At their head was a wheelchair racing at high speed.

CHAPTER 8
HIT THEM WITH ALL WE'VE GOT

◇ **CQ Angel Hamuel**

The confusion was spreading. Hamuel doled out rapid-fire orders through her communicator, saying not to look at the car navigation screens, to destroy the screens, to restrain those Shufflin IIs whose minds had been stolen, et cetera. Atop her palanquin, Lethe closed one eye, the other pointed toward the trucks.

They knew experiments had shown Puk Puck's magic power was effective even through video, and Hamuel had personally seen a video of her and been charmed. But this was far too intense. For the soldiers to be charmed and start becoming violent for Puk Puck's sake just from seeing a video was too powerful.

As the chaos caused by the video of Puk Puck playing on the truck screens was accelerating, the magical-girl mercenary unit headed by Pfle dashed out. Of course, Hamuel had ordered no such thing. This was unauthorized. Pfle wasn't the type to rush ahead out of desire for credit, and neither could Hamuel imagine her unable to control subordinates who had acted on their own. So then did she see this as her opportunity to sweep in at once to attack? If so, she wouldn't be thinking they could get past Puk Puck on their own. She was essentially saying to them, *"Come follow us."* It was like she was playing general of the army.

Hamuel couldn't decide what to do. But as she hesitated, the situation was shifting like sand. This wasn't the time to be indecisive. She knew that, but she still couldn't make up her mind.

She was glaring with the microphone of her communicator still in hand when it was quickly snatched from her. Lethe had taken it over. "All troops, follow after the mercenary forces. Don't look at Puk Puck. Eyes on the ground or the sky, and charge."

Hamuel thought that was a dangerous decision, but she also thought it was the only option. The group of Shufflin IIs started running with Lethe's palanquin in tow and Hamuel bringing up the rear.

"Is that quite all right?" Hamuel asked Lethe.

"If Puk Puck's making her move now, she must have some kind of plan. We'll have the mercenaries hold her in check. Use that opportunity to sneak one or two units into the ruins. If you put an ace of spades among them, then we've won, eh."

"Yes'm… Hmm?"

The mercenary unit, which was stirring up dust as it raced onward, swerved to the right. It was running in the opposite direction, away from the ruins where Puk Puck was, its path circling the basin. That meant the Shufflin IIs, running behind them, were pushed to the front of the forces to stand in the direct line of fire.

Pfle had done nothing more than create an impetus for them, and then, as soon as she saw they'd fallen for it, she'd foisted the toughest job on them.

Lethe snapped her fan in two and tossed it out the side of her palanquin. "That HR scum. Once this is over, I'll have her strung up at the inquiry." Then she nimbly leaped down to the ground, and the next moment, she'd come out to the head of the Shufflin IIs herself. Lethe had intended as much. The Shufflin IIs wouldn't be able to keep Puk Puck in check. They'd be charmed just by approaching, and decreasing their forces while bolstering enemy numbers would only benefit the Puk Faction. Lethe was the only one who could occupy Puk Puck.

"I'll buy some time. Meanwhile, send the Shufflin IIs in," came Lethe's instructions. Her voice sounded close to Hamuel even though she was far away. Hamuel gripped her mic and gave all the Shufflin IIs their orders.

The entrance to the ruins was approaching. And Puk Puck, too. Hamuel had been averting her gaze to avoid looking at Puk Puck directly, so she'd been slow to notice, but other magical girls were pouring out from the ruins as well. They were carrying some kind of equipment—screens. They powered on the screens, and gradually, the images on them became clear. A charming singing voice played, and, hearing it, Hamuel shielded her eyes.

"Don't look at the screens! They're playing videos of Puk Puck!"

◇ Puk Puck

Puk Puck decided not to move from the entrance. If she moved around too much, someone would take that opportunity to get into the ruins. The entrance was thirteen feet tall and ten feet wide, so as long as she was here, nobody could get inside without her noticing.

But there were still a lot of magical girls trying to go right past her to get in, and that made Puk Puck sad. The card soldiers stared at their feet so Puk Puck would be out of their field of vision as they ran for the ruins. Puk Puck came straight up to a nearby card soldier, and right before they collided, smacked the playing card's cheeks with both hands. The card twitched and looked ahead. Her eyes met with Puk Puck's and, in a blink, she became a friend.

"Please, Miss Card Soldier. Stop everyone who's trying to get into the ruins."

With her spear in her right hand, the card soldier faced those who had been her friends until just this moment in order to grant Puk Puck's wish. Puk Puck was somewhat satisfied that she'd managed to get another friend, but there were so many playing cards. Snow White had said, "If you try to make every single one a friend, then they'll get past you." It was really too bad, but she would leave the card soldiers to her high-resolution dance video. Just how many would make it to the ruins, looking at the ground the whole way? Even if they did make it, Puk's strong friends were inside, and farther in was the Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White.

Puk Puck noticed something flying, out of the corner of her eye. She looked toward it to see an angel holding a communicator flying low enough that she just about touched the ground. Snow White had said that CQ Angel Hamuel's job was to give orders to the card soldiers. She'd also said she was an important target.

Even if she was flying in the sky, if you smashed her wings, then she'd fall. Picking up a rock from the ground, Puk Puck raised it, but right when she was about to throw, she was stopped by a call.

"What are you doing, with the enemy general in front of you, eh?"

She threw the rock she'd been about to toss at Hamuel at the owner of the voice. The rock, which would have cracked earth and shattered mountains if it connected, weakly fell to the ground with

a *plunk* before it reached its target.

For a bedaubed aristocrat of the era of the House of Plantagenet to wear a Japanese black-lacquered sheath was an incredible mismatch in style. She drew Puk Puck's eye, but for more than her eccentricity. The magical girl before her—if she was calling herself the general, she had to be Lethe. Lethe's face was turned to Puk Puck, and she wasn't averting her eyes. She was listening to Puk's voice, not plugging her ears. But despite that, she did not become a friend, keeping her wits about her as she stood there.

From the great circular space around them, mixed in with the screams and yells, Puk Puck could hear the singing from her video that everyone praised as "cute" and "pretty." The one on now was an old popular song, and before that had been a nursery rhyme.

Lethe was right in front of Puk Puck, and she wasn't yielding to her. Curiosity bubbled up inside Puk Puck. Her heart was going pitter-patter. Lethe was there, and it looked like if she reached out just a little bit, they could touch. Puk Puck went for it and took one step, but Lethe was still too far away. Puk Puck took a second, a third step forward, but she still didn't reach. When she turned back with sudden realization, one card soldier had gone into the entrance to the ruins.

She'd been lured away. Flustered, Puk Puck tried to return to the entrance, but this time, no matter how she kept going and going, not only did she not arrive at the entrance, she couldn't even get close, and no matter how she reached out, she couldn't make it.

This was Lethe's magic. Puk Puck turned back to face her again. Lethe looked at Puk Puck wandering about in confusion, smiling with just her lips as she drew her sword from its black sheath.

"*Ame-no-Ohabari.*"

The moment she drew that blade, the air grew tense and sharp. Puk Puck let out a breathy *"Ohh."* Lethe was holding a black-lacquered sheath in her left hand, while her right held a mysterious blade that was somewhere between a katana and a saber, but Puk Puck thought she looked beautiful. She thought, *Oh, I want to be friends with her.*

Of course, Puk Puck had the duty to do her best, for everyone's sake. She wasn't just staring in awe. She could sense the flows in the air, the flows of magic power, were being unnaturally twisted. Puk Puck's singing voice, coming from behind Lethe, faded out at parts, becoming quieter, then disappeared. It disappeared in an odd

way, as if it were being pulled farther and farther away.

Lethe approached with flowing movements, and Puk Puck backed up. Lethe's long skirt hid the movements of her legs. Though Puk Puck wouldn't normally pay attention to something like that, right now, her mind was on the way Lethe's legs moved. And that was delightful, too.

Puk Puck spread her arms and smiled. "Big sis, come be friends with Puk!"

Lethe's reply was a slice. She struck downward from above, adding another attack scraping up from the ground, then twisted around to drive in with her sheath. Puk Puck carefully avoided each and every move. Matching Lethe's flowing motions, smooth as butter, with the kind of consideration you'd show to your partner at a high-society dance, she dodged and blocked the attacks, smiling, and said to Lethe, "Hey, be friends with Puk! You're sure to have fun!"

Skirt fluttering, a kick flew out. Puk Puck raised her right arm to block it, then tried to rotate around the axis of Lethe's leg, but her hand grabbed nothing and cut through air. "Huh?"

Something was strange, after all. Something unusual was going on. She blocked, stopped, and evaded a succession of three attacks from Lethe, then kicked a rock at her feet to try to hit Lethe with it, but it lost momentum and fell to the ground before it could connect. The rocks she'd thrown or kicked failed to make it, and when she tried to touch her, her hand didn't reach, either. She could have sworn Lethe was right there, but it was as if she were somewhere far away.

The sword in Lethe's grasp bent like it was soft, and the single blade came to look like two, three. No—the tip of the sword really was dividing into two, then three. The three blades undulated nimbly as if inviting her as they struck. Puk Puck restrained the impulse to touch them and waited. She watched carefully, then blocked them.

She sandwiched the first blade between her thumb and forefinger, the second between her middle and ring finger, and the third between her ring finger and pinkie. Lethe tried to push the blade, tried to pull it, releasing tension and then yanking firmly again, but Puk Puck held it tight and wouldn't let go. She brought her face close to the blade. Though she was already touching it, her desire to touch it grew even more. If she had been a normal magical

girl, these blades would definitely have already plunged into her body.

Puk Puck sniffed. It didn't have much of a smell. This seemed like it was far away, too. That was why Lethe wouldn't become Puk Puck's friend.

"Hey, become friends with Puk. Stop fighting, and let's play together. There's lots of other friends, too. Puk's sure we can all get along."

Lethe let go of the hilt, allowing Puk Puck to take the sword, and leaped back. "*Ame-no-Habakiri.*" She reached out to somewhere far away and brought another sword to her. It was shaped way different from the one before. It had a single thick blade in the middle that branched into more blades.

"*Ame-no-Nuboko.*" And one more, a third—this time, a spear made an appearance. The blade was half as long as the handle, making for the sort of poor balance that looked quite nice to Puk Puck's eyes. She could sense the gushing magical energy itself collected in both weapons, hardened at high density and made into those shapes. Even just still and at the ready, they made humming sounds. They were surely great weapons, famous ones. These had definitely been kept in the Osk Faction's treasure houses or someplace like them.

With the sword in her right hand and the spear in her left, Lethe stood in a sideways stance. There was blood dripping from the corner of her mouth, but she didn't make to wipe it off. She was focused only on Puk Puck.

Puk Puck looked at the sword left in her hands. The blades looked as flimsy as thin sheets of paper, and it was too much trouble to hold on to it, so she tossed it behind her.

The spear thrust toward her, so Puk Puck dodged, and the sword swung at her, so she avoided that, too, but right before she did, it came real close. It sliced over her shin, and though she wasn't cut, the cold sensation of the blade was gross, and it made a cut in her special socks, the ones with ribbons sprinkled over white fabric. Puk Puck was sad.

Lethe's face, which had remained impassive all this time, twisted.

"What's wrong, Lethy? Are you relieved 'cause Puk wasn't hurt? The truth is that you don't want to hurt Puk, right? That's what it is, right?"

Lethe was a powerful magical girl. The precision of her thrusts, the speed of her swings, her vigor, technique, reflexes, agility, muscle strength, every single element was far above the standard. The strength of her magic to draw weapons from far away to her hands was also top-notch. She had confidence, and that was precisely why she was going up against Puk Puck on her own. She wielded these weapons believing that with her physical strength and these keen enchanted blades, she couldn't fail to cut Puk Puck—but despite that, she had failed to do so. It wasn't that Puk Puck had used magic. It wasn't that Lethe's skills were lacking. It was simply that that was what a Sage incarnation was. Strong, fast, and complicated—utterly so, and more than any other.

Lethe would never be a match for Puk Puck.

"Hey, Lethy." Puk Puck came forward, and Lethe retreated.

Blood continued to flow from the corner of Lethe's mouth. Forget attacks—Puk Puck wouldn't even let Lethe touch her. That realization had to be the reason Lethe was biting the inside of her cheek or her tongue. The cracks that had opened up inside her were out of control and spreading.

Puk Puck was sad. Lethe's heart was trying to make friends with Puk Puck, but she thought she shouldn't, and was forcing herself to fight it. That wouldn't make anyone happy. Puk Puck wasn't happy, and Lethe wasn't happy, either. So she thought, *Then let's use magic on the cracks in Lethe's heart.*

"It's really, really fun to get along. You won't have anyone being mean to you or getting mad at you. So, um, um. Be Puk's friend, and let's get along. We can play tag and hide-and-seek, and lots of other games, too. And there's tasty candies. And, and, there's juice, and you can drink as much coffee and tea as you like."

Puk Puck took one more step forward.

◇ **Lethe**

Compared to when she'd experienced it before, Lethe felt that Puk Puck's magic had strengthened dramatically. More than ten years ago, Lethe had been dragged into a conference with Puk Puck, and in the end, she'd wound up as Puk Puck's playmate, playing tag and hide-and-seek and other games. She'd been made to enjoy herself from the bottom of her heart. That evening, those fun memories

had turned to humiliation. She hadn't even realized she'd been being deceived by Puk Puck, charmed by magic, playing and having fun like an idiot, and upon parting, she'd felt sorrow like being torn to pieces.

Puk Puck's magic was far more powerful now than it had been then. Those they'd lost when their hearts had been stolen away by her magic went well beyond feeling positive toward her, reaching the level of worship or blind obedience. For Puk Puck's sake, they would abandon their positions, throw away their lives, do anything. This hadn't happened before. She hadn't been serious at all during their conferences.

Using her magic, Lethe maintained a constant distance, minimizing the effects of Puk Puck's magic. But she still couldn't completely nullify it, and Puk Puck's magic was gradually encroaching on her from the outside, like a kind of venom.

The blades she'd brought out from the treasure houses had all had unparalleled strengthening spells cast on them, and they were sharp enough that even a scratch from them would turn a combat-use homunculus into a black stain. And that wasn't all—they also had the nasty added effect of directly gouging out the soul of whomever they cut. But Puk Puck had resisted that with the tough constitution of a Sage incarnation alone. And because Lethe had carelessly gotten too close in an attempt to wound her enemy, she'd wound up getting hit with Puk Puck's magic, and her brain was doing everything it could to resist the urge to switch sides.

Lethe was an incredibly powerful magical girl. Even in the Archfiend Cram School, packed though it had been with strong fighters, not even once had she thought of herself as lesser. But there was a gap between her and the magical girl in front of her that she could never close. In athleticism, technique, magic, mental fortitude, quality—she was in another dimension in every respect. That fact made Lethe feel stress, and the stress helped the poison of Puk Puck's magic ooze into her, making Puk Puck look even more brilliant and charming.

To use her magic to slip past her to go into the ruins? Impossible. If Lethe got anywhere near Puk Puck, it would be over.

To use her magic on Puk Puck and fire her up high into the sky? Impossible. If she made Puk Puck her target, she would definitely be charmed. The most she could do was cast magic on the area around Puk Puck.

She'd never imagined she would last long against Puk Puck in the first place. She'd thought that if the time came, she could flee. If worst came to worst and she was charmed by Puk Puck, it would still be possible for her to return to the Osk Faction through an exchange of prisoners. But all those options had been eliminated when they'd found out about Puk Puck's plan. If she activated the device, everything would come to ruin.

What Lethe had to do now was buy time, every second she could. Time for anyone, be it Hamuel or that scummy Pfle or the Shufflin IIs, to reach the device. And it was clear how she could buy the most time. If she eliminated Puk Puck, that would buy the longest and greatest amount.

Lethe bit through the inside of her cheek. Pain and the taste of iron sharpened her mind.

She thrust out her spear, and Puk dodged; she swept out her sword, and Puk avoided it. Lethe couldn't be careless and get too close. Puk Puck would understand that, too. Maintaining distance from her opponent, she stood in a sideways stance and brought her right leg one step forward. Stomping hard enough to crack the rock beneath her, she sent power into different parts of her body—right arm, back, shoulders, knees, and calves—then looked up at the sky and raised her spear. She did not point her blade at Puk Puck, but below her. Flinging the spear, at the same time she placed a wide distance between herself and the weapon, making it move up above the clouds. In this isolated world, there was no inner or outer space. The spear flew on, forever and ever.

Puk Puck was giving Lethe a curious look. She must not have understood what Lethe was doing. Praying that she would not figure it out, Lethe raised the sword in both hands and thrust forward. She swept the blade across, then back in the other direction, attacking repeatedly with the unshakable intent to land the killing blow. She went far and then came closer, her dress dirtied by the blood dripping from her mouth. Not yet.

She plunged her sword forward, then forward again. Puk Puck was leaping backward, and the timing, the location, all of it perfectly matched everything Lethe had been aiming for. It was just for an instant, but Puk Puck's feet left the ground. Puk Puck didn't have the power to fly. In other words, she couldn't move freely in the air.

Lethe shrank the distance between the spear far in the high sky

and the earth. She made minute adjustments to each side of the weapon as well, bringing it into position to pierce Puk Puck. The force of this attack was nothing like her earlier stroke, made when she'd been ready to back away to avoid getting hit by the enemy's magic. Gravity pulled the spear down from high in the sky to plummet downward, accelerating with fierce momentum. And it would connect with Puk Puck. With her feet off the ground, it would be impossible for her to avoid the strike.

Yes, it unfortunately would connect.

Lethe reflexively shrank the distance between herself and Puk Puck, knocking her aside, and the spear fell from the heavens to pierce Lethe's body instead. Blood scattered, spilling from her mouth, and Lethe fell on her side on the ground. Her impulsive move to protect Puk Puck brought her despair, but also joy. Puk Puck was looking down on Lethe with sadness. Lethe tried to say that she wanted her to smile more, but instead of words, blood overflowed from her mouth.

Puk Puck raced away from Lethe. Lying in a puddle of blood, Lethe stroked her own chest with trembling hands, clenching at the air. The joy gradually dissipated, and anger and hatred took their place. At the very last moment, Puk Puck's magic had caught her, and she'd taken that final strike on herself, falling in a way she could not deny was foolish. And now she was about to die. She felt nothing but endless regret for having protected Puk Puck, for having been made to protect her, mortification whirling in her heart as gradually her life seeped away. Any magical girl with lesser vitality would have already died. But a slight superiority in vitality wouldn't help her survive this, and she couldn't gallantly appear to save her subordinates from trouble, either. He consciousness grew dim, sounds fading, vision twisting up. In her distorted field of view, a blue shadow approached and touched her cheek. Something rolled out of her, and her hate and regret disappeared just like that. Freed from her negative emotions, she smiled peacefully and passed.

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

They had to attack now, or all their efforts would have been for nothing. The best outcome would be Lethe beating Puk Puck, but if

that could be so easily accomplished, Lethe would have headed out at the start. Worst case, Lethe would be charmed by Puk Puck and join the enemy side. Hamuel had to finish things somehow before then.

Hamuel flew at a low altitude to avoid being targeted from the ground, observing the enemy's movements.

She had so many orders to give. She brought the microphone of her communicator to her lips. "Don't look at the video on the screens," "Consider it acceptable to sacrifice ten for just one to get into the ruins," "Run as fast as you can," "Don't stop even if your allies are in trouble"—all orders she was weary of giving, but she had to say them nevertheless. It was no longer possible to keep casualties to a minimum when settling matters. It wasn't that she hadn't at all expected Puk Puck to join the fight herself. It was just that this meant heavy losses, so Hamuel would rather she hadn't.

The battlefield was now a miserable sight to behold.

There were sets of large screens and speakers as far as the eye could see. Hamuel jerked her gaze away. She could imagine what was playing on the screens when she saw Shufflin IIs nailed to them with intoxicated expressions.

The Puk Faction's forces were doing more than just installing screens and speakers. They were also mercilessly attacking the very clearly defenseless Shufflin IIs who were plugging their ears and looking at the ground, racing as fast as they could. The enemy mowed them down with assault guns, fired destructive lasers at them, tripped them to knock them down, or kneed them in their guts as they passed by. And the moment the Shufflin IIs tried to strike back, the enemy hid behind the large screens, and when the Shufflin IIs looked over, they were captured by the sight of Puk Puck and froze.

There were very few exceptions to this, like with the aces of spades, who took the hits unflinchingly as they charged on ahead, knocking down the screens and the enemy magical girls in their way to enter the ruins. But these were exceptions of about one in a dozen troops at most, and Hamuel didn't know if there would be results commensurate with the losses.

Even as her voice was becoming hoarse, Hamuel yelled into her mic. "The device should be in the deepest part of the ruins! You must not destroy it! Just make them stop the ceremony without destroying it!"

But even as she said that, a bitterness remained on her tongue. Why did she have to sacrifice people who were alive now for the sake of carefully protecting a piece of junk some dead person had left behind? They should have taken the device apart or buried it along with the ruins to begin with, before the Puk Faction had done anything. It was their failure to do that that had resulted in this mess. But nevertheless, Hamuel couldn't go against her orders, and, despite her bitterness, she struggled on.

"If we can stop the enemy's plans, even if everyone here winds up controlled, it's our victory!"

Doing a half rotation in the air to avoid a head-size rock that flew at her, Hamuel kicked down a screen while she was at it. She rose in the air by half her height, and from there she crossed the battlefield at low altitude as if crawling along the ground, flipping upside down along the way to scoop up a fallen magical phone. A black-and-white mascot hologram was projected from it. When it was out here in the middle of a battlefield like this, even Hamuel, who couldn't really be called sharp-sighted, could find something that stood out that much.

"Can't you do something about this?!" Hamuel demanded.

"Do something?! Like what, pon?!" Fal yelled back.

"You're a cyber fairy, aren't you? Can't you jack the lines to replace that with a Shufflin II dance video?"

"I can't, pon!"

"What do you mean you can't?! Aren't you the cyber fairy that serves the Magical-Girl Hunter?!"

"Then get me my master, pon! There's no way I could do that without authorization from her, pon! When you say that, do you understand what sort of things happen when an individual cyber fairy is given that kind of authorization, pon?!"

"No more than a mascot in the end! Useless!"

"Osk garbage! Don't assume you can just pull anything you like, pon!"

Hamuel restrained the urge to turn off the phone's power.

Even while they were cursing at each other, Hamuel always kept a sharp eye out around her and did aerial acrobatics. In the first place, Hamuel's job was to stand behind a commander and say things like, *"Wouldn't it be best to do it like this?"* while offering every support to her leader. She couldn't really be said to be good at dodging and ducking projectiles on the front lines. The number

of enemies in the clearing was increasing, since those who had just been allies were becoming foes. She couldn't keep running around like this forever, either. She wasn't strong enough to break through by force as the aces of spades had done.

Still facing front, in a more rational and restrained tone than her emotional one before, she said to Fal, "Your body isn't all you can display in your hologram, right? You sometimes put up scenery in the background."

"I can capture images for use, pon."

"I see. Are they highly accurate?"

"It's image capture, so it's no different from the real thing, pon."

"So then I would like to make a request."

"What, pon?"

Hamuel gradually slowed and descended, hitting the rock slope of the basin wall with her shoulder to minimize damage. But of course that didn't mean no damage at all, and it hurt rather more than somewhat, but she managed to suck it up and kept a tight grip on the magical phone in her right hand.

When she hit the rock face, she scattered fragments of boulder before sliding downward. She held herself as she rolled, and when she stood up with a groan, she found herself right in front of a large screen. Raising herself, still hunched over, she brought her face around to point motionlessly at the screen.

"Hooray for Lady Puk! All for Lady Puk!"

Even in the chaos, it was easy to find those who were not yet devoted to Puk Puck. Those who kept their eyes closed, those who ran while unnaturally facing downward, those who were not overflowing with happiness—the ones devoted to Puk Puck attacked those types and tried to show them the video of their mistress. Swiftly understanding this, Hamuel had Fal create a hologram, and by having the mascot deploy it to cover her real face with an expression overflowing with joy, she fooled the Puk Faction.

Right now, Hamuel was like a character in a zombie movie who pretended to be a zombie to hide among the zombies, moaning *"Ahhh"* and *"Ughhh"* as she planned her escape. Despite having deflected immediate danger, this was not a fundamental solution. Even though she'd managed to pull the wool over their eyes, what was there to do now?

All Hamuel could do was pray for a useful moment and pretend to be a zombie and attack Shufflin IIs. She prayed for the safety of those who had gone into the ruins, and for their successful interruption of the ceremony. That reminded her that she hadn't seen Pfle or her subordinates, or Mana and Uluru. Had they managed to get into the ruins before Hamuel had come onto the battlefield, or had they come to a fruitless end? Hamuel prayed for their safety and success, too, just in case.

◇ Uluru

When the Puk Faction girls came from the basin to attack the truck area, Uluru told them, "Uluru was undercover in the Osk Faction on Lady Puk's orders, but now it's okay for me to come back. Lady Puk said to guide me into the ruins." Nobody in their right mind would believe a lie like that, but the enemy didn't seem to hear it at all. Uluru threw herself to the ground to avoid their attacks, then leaped and jumped to avoid their pursuing strikes.

They'd known Uluru had been kicked out of the Puk Faction, so of course they would have taken measures to deal with her magic. If you could protect yourself with just a set of earplugs, there was no way they wouldn't do it. Uluru cursed her magic's weakness, but still, she couldn't run away now.

Mana was close by, but Uluru couldn't count on her. She wasn't a magical girl—she was a mage. While watching Pfle go, heading the charge of magical girls, Mana had stuck a syringe into her own neck. However it worked, what Uluru had been told was that the drug improved her reflexes and movement. But it still couldn't enable her to fight with magical girls. All she could manage was to use the added strength from the drug to desperately avoid enemy attacks. Hiding under trucks and slipping into cracks, Mana was just barely avoiding the blackjacks and batons the enemies wielded.

Uluru yelled, "Uluru's good friends with Lady Puk! Traitors to Lady Puk are attacking Uluru!" Her voice wouldn't reach those who had earplugs in. But those who didn't have them would hear her voice. Those who had only just been charmed by Puk Puck would hear her.

Card soldiers who'd been running toward the ruins turned around to come back, using their clubs to strike from behind and

knock down magical girls who'd been raising their batons.

"Uluru's good friends with Lady Puk! Traitors to Lady Puk are attacking Uluru!" Uluru repeated. The card soldiers had gotten all shuffled up, with no distinction among spades, clubs, hearts, and diamonds, and had become a group under her control to attack her enemies. When the magical girls who'd been attacked from behind tried to turn around, this time Uluru kicked them down from the other side. Caught between attacks from front and back, the magical girls got kicked and punched and hit the ground on their faces. The card soldiers raised their spears against the fallen and still girls, but Uluru cried, "Lady Puk also said to just leave them!" So the card soldiers lowered their readied weapons without complaint, limiting themselves to kicking their defeated foes away.

Uluru looked at Mana, Mana looked back at Uluru, and Uluru nodded.

"This is an order from Lady Puk! We're going back to the ruins, so guard us!" Uluru cried.

Having been charmed by Puk Puck already, the card soldiers couldn't get any more charmed. Their feet didn't stop, whether they saw her face on the screens or heard her singing. Uluru grabbed Mana's hand, and Mana squeezed back firmly. With the card soldiers circling them, magical girl and mage headed over the trucks to race through the basin.

On the edge of the wide-open area, at a speed so fast even Uluru couldn't see them, two somethings collided and came apart, mixed up together in a cloud of dust. They were too fast, and Uluru hadn't been able to see them properly, but she could tell one of them was Puk Puck.

She'd only ever thought of working for Lady Puk's sake, living for Lady Puk's sake, dying for Lady Puk's sake. Now her feelings for Puk Puck had faded to a shocking degree. Or maybe it was more accurate to say that nothing from Puk Puck reached Uluru. Instead of thoughts like, *for Lady Puk's sake, if I just have Lady Puk,* memories of the past captured her and wouldn't let go: that time at the amusement park when Puk Puck had bought ice cream for everyone there, even other people's kids, and she'd wiped the mess of ice cream from Sachiko's face and cleaned her up; playing tag and hide-and-seek; sports days; that time she'd thrown a tantrum, saying that there had to be sweet bean flavor for the bread-eating contest or she didn't want to do it—everywhere in her memories,

there was Puk Puck.

Uluru squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again. Telling herself to keep her eyes up front, she just ran. When she squeezed Mana's hand, Mana squeezed it back. When she squeezed it hard, Mana squeezed hard back. Uluru squeezed particularly hard, and when a squeeze equally strong came back to her, she yelled, "Everyone who tries to attack us are all traitors!"

A three of hearts was enveloped in flame, a six of clubs was bitten by invisible fangs, an eight of clubs grappled with another club as they tumbled to the ground. An ace of spades skewered a magical girl who tried to block their path and tossed her away. And that was someone Uluru knew, too. She'd been Uluru's elder at the Puk Puck estate, and she'd always been so bossy about everything, and Uluru had constantly been mad at her, but she also knew she was the one who'd secretly made rice balls for her during night watch.

That magical girl was thrown up high and flung toward the rear. Uluru kept on clenching her teeth. She absolutely couldn't lose sight of what she was trying to do right now. She squeezed Mana's hand hard, and hers was squeezed hard back.

◇ Shadow Gale

One thing went well, and then that led rapidly to the next and the next, and the thing after that went well, too. Things began to flow smoothly, and Shadow Gale had the feeling everything was helping them along.

Once they'd solved the password, that was it. It seemed the device deemed whoever solved the password an ally. As if to say, *"Since you're an ally, I can offer you my body,"* it had released its magic barrier, and the work had moved along without a hitch.

After the talismans, the armor, the password, and the barrier, finally, she could make changes to what was inside. From here on out, Shadow Gale would be the main one doing the work. A magical girl who used metal-carving magic remade Shadow Gale's wrench into a modification tool specifically for use on this device.

When she opened it, it was all parts she'd never seen before, but that wasn't much of a problem for her. Shadow Gale had never been good with machines before, so she'd often wondered why she'd

been granted magic like this. She'd pessimistically wondered if the reason had been so she could modify a certain tyrant's wheelchair—but that wasn't it. Shadow Gale had been granted this magic in order to modify this device for Puk Puck's sake, for the sake of a good world, for the sake of the Magical Kingdom, and for the sake of all magical girls. She was proud, grateful, and glad. As she pinched and rotated with her new modification tool, each and every one of these tasks felt dazzling and bright.

Puk Puck danced on the digital screens, while Puk Puck's adorable singing voice played on an endless loop from the speakers. It was the best working environment in the world. The tense atmosphere was long gone, and now no one was arguing, no one was clicking their tongues, and no one was looking grumpy. They were all, without exception, having fun, basking in the joy of being able to serve the greatest leader, Puk Puck, as they were united under the common cause of bringing this device to completion. The weight on their shoulders was, in other words, equivalent to the world itself. Normally, like back when she had been whiling away her life without a goal, she would have been crushed under the weight of it. But now things were different. Puk Puck was on the screen. Shadow Gale felt like she was watching over her. She felt a sense of duty, that she didn't want to make Puk Puck sad.

They were starting to see the end of this. It was almost there, so close, in one more hour, or thirty minutes, or maybe in less than five minutes, it could be done—then the singing stopped. Everyone looked toward the screens. Puk Puck was still there, doing her adorable dance. Puk Puck never getting discouraged, even when dancing among rubble, was kind of symbolic.

The screens were running. But the speakers were silent.

Everyone knew they had to focus on the device. But it was a fact that Puk Puck's singing coming from the speakers had been soothing them and helping them concentrate. Most of all, they doubted they could stand an environment without her singing. This thing they had never before assumed would be there had now become vital to them.

Everyone started standing up to look at the speakers, but before they could get up, there was a muffled crackling from the speakers, and then the voice of a magical girl followed. "The magical girls of the Osk Faction have invaded. Please be cautious."

The voice said only that, and then Puk Puck's singing was

streaming from the speakers again. Although this calmed the girls' hearts, the unsettling message that had just played made them exchange knowing looks. No one needed to explain what the intruders were here to do. They were here to interfere with the ceremony.

One magical girl rose to her feet. "Let's do our best! Guys! We're not going to let them get in our way!"

The others also stood one after another. "Let's put an end to this world where magical girls fight each other!"

"For the new world! For Lady Puk!"

Shadow Gale stood up, too. "For Lady Puk!"

"Yeah, for Lady Puk!"

They'd quarreled before. They'd been jealous of each other, too. But now their feelings were one. For Lady Puk. For Lady Puk.

With no particular one initiating it, the magical girls made a circle, stacking their right hands on top of each other. "Let's do our best!" one cried, and with a cheer in reply, they all returned to their tasks once more.

CHAPTER 9
THE MAGICAL-GIRL HUNTER

◇ **Pfle**

It had all taken shape just about perfectly. Having Lethe fight Puk Puck had created a path into the ruins while simultaneously stealing the role of command from Lethe. No one else could give the order to assassinate Shadow Gale. So long as Lethe was pinned to the spot, the order would not be sent out. Now what remained was to reach the depths of the ruins where the sanctum of the device lay before the Osk Faction did and stop Shadow Gale in a way other than by killing her. Since they'd discovered Puk Puck's goal, and it was very apparent that the Osk Faction would do whatever it took to stop her, this was best.

But though things had gone perfectly, Pfle wasn't so optimistic to think this guaranteed things would work out. Thus far had been the result of effort and luck, and further effort and luck would be required from here on out.

Pfle raced in her wheelchair. It carved into the right wall of the basin as she ran over the ground, making it past the area that was dense with screens, destroying the TVs with the killer laser that fired from her wheelchair. Passing the screens as they exploded and went up in flames, the mercenary magical girls raced after her.

Lethe drew Puk Puck away from the ruins entrance. The two of them looked blurry and distant, and Pfle couldn't see them clearly. Now they could do it.

Magical girls carrying portable screens were pouring out from inside the ruins. Checking the images on the screens through squinted eyes, Pfle couldn't gain any information beyond the fact that the screens were playing something, but she could easily figure out what it was. Already, Shufflins who had seen it were stopping

and staring. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before they were pointing their spears at their allies.

Puk Puck closed her eyes. She set her wheelchair operation to auto. When stray bullets flew at her, the return fire device would manage them somehow. To get to one's goal just by curling up in a chair was a rare magic indeed.

Mamori had said her "magic to use a magical wheelchair to race at intense speeds" was too simple and didn't suit her character. Being Mamori, she also failed to realize that its simplicity was precisely what made it so user-friendly. And besides, with Mamori's magic, she could power her wheelchair up.

For all her endless complaints, grumbling, and whining, Mamori had modified the wheelchair bit by bit every single day, and though she herself would never acknowledge it, it was apparent that she eventually became even more attached to the wheelchair than Pfle. Even without Pfle saying anything, Mamori came to suggest new modification plans, combining both ease of use and combat capacity in powering up the wheelchair far past its original functionality.

Mamori's magic had been reaching new levels through powering up Pfle's wheelchair, and now it would be used in a form that was completely against Mamori's own will.

The sensation was enough to tell her that the wheelchair had fired the killer lasers again. Rattling and swaying over the unpaved ground, she pulled wild stunts, stopping, spinning around, backing up, crossing over something, then accelerating. Despite all the reckless motion, its rider was never thrown off. That was just the sort of magic Pfle had.

The killer lasers fired again. The high heat scorched Pfle's cheeks and singed the ends of her hair, and a nasty smell hit her nostrils. Then a cold wind flowed from the same direction, and a spoonful's worth of fluffy-soft powder snow stroked her right eyelid. Catching up alongside her wheelchair was Deluge, come to back her up. Dark Cutie was probably following, too. They were both capable.

And the wheelchair was just as capable. Repeatedly going from an inertia drift to a sudden brake like a living creature, then going to sudden acceleration, it climbed up the cliff, then raced down. The most damage she took was from a blade that skimmed her hair. Pfle loudly yelled instructions at the mercenaries. "Ignore

everything else! Just get as many as possible into the ruins!”

After that came out of her mouth, she had the thought: *That was not an instruction.*

It was an instruction that wasn’t really an instruction, but the magical girls didn’t complain. From behind, footsteps passed the wheelchair and headed into the ruins. The way they just did the job without a word made Pfle feel she could rely on them as she clung to the arms of her wheelchair.

◇ Snow White

The enemy had broken through the Puk Faction’s defensive line, and they were invading the ruins one after another. That meant that Puk Puck was not holding all the enemies back. Snow White desperately restrained her desire to immediately rush to her mistress’s side. Staying at her post and giving her all would be for Puk Puck’s sake. That would make Puk Puck the happiest.

Snow White’s job had been to arrange the trio of Armor Arlie, Blade Brenda, and Cannon Catherine to support Puk Puck, give them appropriate instructions, and deploy them, but that arrangement had already fallen apart. Puk Puck had entered one-on-one combat, and no others could approach them. So Snow White judged that she and the three black-armored magical girls should act independently.

A hundred feet from the entrance, where the corridor split into a three-way intersection, she went to fight back.

An ace of spades pounded and stabbed Armor Arlie, but she didn’t fall even then, snapping back at her enemy. The ace mercilessly thrust her spear into spots were Arlie had taken damage and pieces of her armor had broken off, but Arlie still would not fall —in fact, something like a black mucus came out from the places where she was damaged to plug up the wounds, becoming even stronger and thicker armor to defend her.

If Arlie could manage the ace alone, that would make the rest a little easier.

Blade Brenda sliced the spears the enemies threw into eight pieces, while Cannon Catherine fired her magical cannon at the enemies, who were all clustered together in the restricted corridor. Her black magic cannonballs blasted back a whole cluster of

Shufflins, and they bounced off the ceiling and walls of the narrow hallway.

Cutting through the billowing clouds of dust, an ace of spades leaped out. It was a different unit from the one Arlie had taken on. Multiple aces had made it into the ruins. One of Snow White's cheeks twisted up. If there were a lot of those, this would get tough.

The ace lunged forward so fast you could hardly see it, ripping through the humid air to thrust her spear. Brenda blocked it with her sword, but the ace forced her to the ground together with her blade, then stepped on her twice. The ace passed under the aim of Catherine's cannon and thrust her spear up—Snow White came in to defend Catherine, blocking the spear with her own weapon, but the shock it rattled up her arms was enough to make them numb, and she just about dropped her blade.

Getting to her feet, Brenda sliced at the ace from behind, but the ace grabbed her black blade with her bare hand and knocked Brenda back with a roundhouse kick. Snow White took advantage of that opening to lunge in with her weapon, but the ace of spades spun around, knocking Snow White's weapon aside with a swing of her spear, and when Snow White lost her balance, the ace arced her spear upward—but then stopped. Snow White's right hand was up in front of her face. And in her hand was the new magical phone she'd just been supplied with, Puk Puck dancing there on the screen.

When she handed the magical phone to the ace of spades, she obediently accepted it, leaning forward enthusiastically with devouring eyes as she became nailed to the screen. If she watched it for thirty seconds, she'd become one of Puk Puck's friends and attack her former allies for them.

Out of the corner of her eye, Snow White saw Catherine pull Brenda to her feet. She ran her gaze over toward the entrance. The sounds were loud and getting closer. And the hearts' voices were not just of the Puk Faction—many enemy magical girls' voices were joining them, too. Puk Puck wasn't keeping the entrance blocked. There were more and more new foes. Their own side was gathering the mercenaries who'd been scattered within the ruins to fight back, but non-Shufflin magical girls were coming up on the enemy side as well, and they were fighting with Puk Puck's forces.

Should she head out to back them up now? Or should she fight off the enemies that had leaked in? Snow White focused on what

she could hear. She inclined her ears to the voices of the hearts that sounded from all over the ruins—and then her eyes flared open, and she ran off. Brenda and Catherine followed in silence, without asking questions.

The interior of the ruins consisted of a complex labyrinth, but Snow White had made sure to memorize the full layout. She raced through the corridors, taking the shortest possible route to the ruins' depths.

In front of the sanctum where the device was placed, there was a small guardroom for the magical girls on watch to gather in. Seeing Snow White rush in, they seemed to realize that something bad was happening. Of the ten magical girls, five stood and followed her when she kicked open the door of the sanctum.

Inside were the magical girls working on the device. They looked at the intruders with surprise. Snow White ran straight in without pausing, body-slammed the magical girl with a black hime cut who was on the computer, and sent her flying. Ignoring her cry as she rolled away, Snow White raised her weapon to block the attack that rose from the ground.

"The enemy is here! Attack!" Snow White commanded.

The other magical girls had earplugs, but telling them with her expression and actions would be enough. Snow White leaped back, and a light beam, an iron ball, and a black cannonball all fired at once, shattering open the floor. A magical girl who was black all over was exposed from under the earth, and when she panicked and tried to dive down, a black cannonball hit her, and she was blasted away in a small explosion, bouncing off the wall to fall on the floor, where she spasmed facedown.

Snow White exhaled a deep breath. If she hadn't heard that voice from underground, that one would have gotten through. She couldn't hear any more voices. That was the end of it.

The ruins were made of carved stones put together. A magical girl whose ability was to be able to get into any crack had sneaked into the deepest area, but they had managed to finish her off before she'd done any damage.

The rear guard dragged away the black-armored magical girl, and Snow White looked around. In the clouds of dust, she instructed all the pale-faced and frightened-looking girls, "Don't stop moving, keep working, please," then said to one of them, the nurse in black, "Shadow Gale. How are things progressing?"

“Um…wh-what was that just now?” Shadow Gale replied.

“The enemy. It seems it was a magical girl who could sneak into the gaps between the rocks. So how is everything going?”

“R-right. It’s going well. I’m not particularly stuck anywhere.”

So then they still didn’t need to have her use the contract. As long as Puk Puck was occupied, there would be things Snow White had to make the decision on. It was a heavy responsibility, but a worthwhile one. The solid sense of working for Puk Puck’s sake gave her courage and motivation.

“Then we’ll be counting on you,” Snow White told her. “As I just said, please don’t stop working.”

Snow White thought. The enemy had sent an assassin directly into the sanctum. So there was absolutely no guarantee this place was safe. If the enemy used magic to make themselves invisible, magic to melt into the air, magic for teleportation, anything like that, then suitable measures would be required to protect the device.

Snow White turned back to the magical girls in the guardroom. “The enemy is currently invading from the entrance. Everyone, please head that way to fight them off. We’ll stay here. If I hear the voices of their hearts, then even if an invisible enemy invades here, I can deal with them.”

Since Puk Puck had told the guards to “make sure to follow what Snowy Sis says,” even the old-timers would listen to orders from an intolerable newbie. With Catherine, Brenda, and Snow White taking their places, the magical girls of the guardroom ran off to the front lines.

Snow White put her hand into the bag that hung from her waist and pulled out the magical girls inside: a Shufflin jack, queen, and king of spades that she’d had Puk Puck befriend for this particular situation.

◇ Pfle

At a glance, Pfle could tell the ten magical girls who came running out from deeper in the caves were veterans. She recognized a number of faces among the group, some of whom she would rather have hired to work for her, if possible. And based on how fast the others were running, they were also different from those magical

girls who had only just gotten a taste of battle. But the mercenary magical girls Pfle had personally selected for hire were no ordinary magical girls, either—and the forces collided head-on.

Swords and magic wands clashed, and sparks flew. The swing of a great scythe ripped through matter and space together, and everyone jumped aside, but now there was a big slice open in the hallway. The girl who took a step toward it fell into a little hole and was sucked in. Another magical girl scribbled off some characters in the hallway with a pen, which manifested to fly at the enemies. Purple gas was fired off, and those caught in it fell to the ground. The others dispersed to avoid it, and that was the instant the hallway opened up. Deluge and Dark Cutie clung to either side of the wheelchair, and Pfle raced past at full speed.

The enemy sliced, kicked, and fired light beams at the wheelchair as it came rushing by, but the mercenaries protected the wheelchair with shields, mirrors, and their own bodies. When the floor was made into a muddy quagmire in an attempt to sink the wheelchair, Deluge instantly froze the mud, and they ran over it, the curved matter accelerating them on their path to the safety zone. From the shadows, Deluge deployed the Demon Wings, having them guard the party from the jagged-edged light rays that were fired at their backs. The Demon Wings that were hit by the light rays spewed smoke and shrank. Deluge ordered the Demon Wings to block any attacks coming from behind them, and finally the wheelchair burst away from the enemies that surrounded them.

Pfle drifted over the ground, then turned a corner to find six more magical girls waiting ahead. They didn't seem as strong as the earlier ten, but they outnumbered Pfle's forces. Deluge met the enemy's bullets of light with ice arrows, and Dark Cutie brought her hands together.

A hound made from shadow crawled around through the narrow corridor. Due to the nature of the phenomenon that was shadow, Dark Cutie's magic couldn't form anything three-dimensional, and it could only move over surfaces. But they were inside these ruins, in an endless corridor of floor, walls, and ceiling. Her shadows had more freedom of movement here than they did on the street. Walls cracked, the flooring flew apart, and the ceiling broke open. Being a villain, Dark Cutie was not concerned with the idea that she must not damage valuable ruins.

The magical girls did not go unscathed, either. Skin cracked,

blood flew, and flesh broke open, but they never lost their will to fight, backing up farther down the corridor to escape from the range of Dark Cutie's shadows. Then Deluge loosed her arrows of ice, and in response, a shield of flame appeared in the air to block the arrows. That was the enemy's magic.

The arrows of ice evaporated in an instant, vanishing in a spray of steam, and the ice arrows that followed were also blocked by the shield of fire. A total of ten ice arrows sublimating into steam left the vapor hanging all around them, and the whole hallway became humid like a sauna. It whited out the field of view, keeping them from seeing ahead by even a foot.

That was when the ray of light shot out. It was a beam from Pfle's wheelchair. With a spotlight coming from behind, a giant shadow was projected over the steam. Normally, Dark Cutie's magic could project a shadow only over flat surfaces. But by dropping a shadow over mist, she made it even bigger, and she could also make it "stand up." A giant sword pierced the shield of flame, and a thorny whip struck the magical girls who had taken refuge beyond it.

But the magical girls still did not flee. They raised their weapons and shields, and those who lacked either used their arms as shields, and they pumped themselves up with battle cries as they charged ahead, slipping past the whip to attack Dark Cutie, but the hallway floor had been frozen by Deluge's magic. Their feet slid out from underneath them and they tumbled to the ground, the whip striking them while they were down. By the time the sound of screams and cries had faded, the mist had finally cleared, and the pitiful bodies of the magical girls lay fallen in heaps.

Deluge narrowed her eyes. Pfle was aware that her attempts not to feel stress were in fact causing stress for her. But though Pfle was aware of this, what she needed right now was not a way to reduce Deluge's stress. That was something Deluge could think about all she liked once she had settled her own problems herself. She could do that somewhere far away that Pfle didn't know about.

The din of metallic clashing, screams, and yells was coming from quite a bit behind them. They'd come this far dropping allies to move forward, just like a rocket purging its parts to fly. Pfle was ignoring everything except for speed—hardly a praiseworthy tactic. But speed was what she needed right now. If Puk Puck came back into the ruins, that would cause an upheaval in the balance of

forces. And then if the Osk Faction arrived at the device before Pfle, Shadow Gale would be in danger. Pfle would abandon everything else to reach the device's location faster than anyone else.

But the enemy was still full of energy and its morale was high, and attempting to push forward quickly would up the damage they took. The mercenaries and the Shufflins were indeed doing their best. But Pfle had no idea how long they would hold. Her initial instructions had kept allied losses to a minimum. But there would be more now. No matter how strong the aces of spades were, if they were up against other brainwashed aces of spades, they would not go unscathed. What's more, since their side was handicapped by having to look away from the TV screens, it was restricted in how it could fight.

There had been no kinds of tricks or traps thus far. Instead, there were stuffed bears on the floors and lace curtains on the walls. That fruity, floral scent was probably perfume. Pfle charged forward without even considering possible traps. She trusted that the enemy would not lay traps on a path where allies—even Puk Puck—were bound to be walking.

The trio hurried onward. The stone corridor was wide enough that three magical girls could run abreast, but when you added in the personal effects the Puk Faction had laid down and the presence of the wheelchair, that wasn't possible anymore. Pfle took the lead, destroying screens with her automatic-fire killer lasers, and Deluge and Dark Cutie followed. The sounds of the wheelchair's motor and footsteps rang out on the floor. The path occasionally branched off, but, making mental comparisons with the map of the ruins that Hamuel had shown her, Pfle choose the shortest possible route to the sanctum.

The corridors went on for what seemed like an eternity.

Unfamiliar symbols and patterns were scrawled tightly over every section of the walls, ceiling, and floor of these corridors of carved rock, emitting a faint white light and probably magical power, too.

They passed by more large TVs that seemed to have been placed at regular intervals by the invaders, the screens illuminating the dim hallways like streetlamps shining on country roads. The farther they went, the more screens there were, and the wheelchair fired off volleys of shots as it pressed on ahead.

Firing its lasers continuously slowed it down. Deluge shot ice

arrows to destroy two nearby speakers.

"Deluge," said Pfle, "you'll burn out quickly, so no more than that. You'd be sorely mistaken to think that ingesting that drug will deal with it."

Deluge was visibly displeased, mouth twisting as she brought her eyebrows together to look back at Pfle. Her expression was saying, *"So then what do I do?"*

Pfle went right at a cross intersection, then left at a T intersection, then straight ahead after that, and they ran into some more of Puk's girls. They'd dug a trench-like hole and were inside it, with a barricade made of junk erected in front. The muzzles of multiple automatic weapons were pointed at Pfle's party. Dark Cutie's hands moved so fast, her arms looked like many limbs, and she dug into the ground with a drill and shovel made of shadow, instantly boring through it. With chunks of rock as their shield, Deluge and Dark Cutie—and Pfle and her wheelchair, when they grabbed her collar and dragged her in—dropped into the hole Dark Cutie had just dug out. A heartbeat later, the bullets from the automatic weapons swept over them, and Pfle ducked her head down inside the hole. The gunfire ate into the rock, and fragments rained down into the hole.

From their side flew the killer lasers of Pfle's wheelchair and Deluge's ice arrows, while the enemy let loose a shower of bullets. As both sides were firing projectile weapons at each other, Dark Cutie bent her fingers, wrists, and elbows at angles that made you doubt she had joints, combining them to make a tiger shadow puppet. The tiger crawled along the ground, passing under the chaos of bullets and arrows to disappear past the barricade. Screams rose behind the barricade, from inside the trench the gunfire stopped, and the barricade came down. Deluge, Dark Cutie, and Pfle leaped out of their trench to rush out again.

Crossing over the trench, the trio kept going, and just when they were about to turn right at a cross intersection, Pfle turned back. Dark Cutie and Deluge were already in combat stances. Pleasant-sounding footsteps echoed down the corridor as a white figure appeared, smoothly evading the fox Dark Cutie sent to her to lunge in with her *naginata*-like weapon. Dark Cutie sliced back with a shadow katana, and Snow White jumped off the wall to dodge, striking aside the ice arrow Deluge shot at her at the same time. Two sets of armor followed Snow White, one carrying a sword and

the other carrying a cannon—Blade Brenda and Cannon Catherine, to boot.

This seemed to be a tougher spot for the Puks than the Osks, since the latter had stationed guards here. Pfle disengaged the automatic steering on her wheelchair and charged toward the Magical-Girl Hunter, Snow White.

◇ Mana

Mana and Uluru managed to get into the ruins fine, with eight card soldiers along with them. Uluru insisted they push ahead, so Mana ran after her, she just ran and kept running on some more, but as she did, the effects of the drug were fading, and she fell farther and farther behind Uluru, who was heedlessly racing onward. And since the card soldiers were running at Uluru's pace, they paid no attention to whatever happened to Mana.

She had to call Uluru to a stop here, or she'd get left behind. Grabbing her magical phone while running, she threw it ahead of her, and it smacked Uluru square in the back of the head.

Uluru stopped and turned back, clearly very angry. "What was that for?!"

"You're going too fast. My drug is wearing off."

"Are you dumb? We have to hurry!"

"Who are you calling dumb? Don't assume I'm like you magical girls."

"Then Uluru will slow down for you. Let's get going."

"First, there's something I want to ask."

"What? Make it snappy."

"Should we be here? I get the feeling this isn't where the device is, though." Picking up the magical phone she'd just thrown, Mana brought up the map of the ruins, which she'd saved beforehand. She remembered they'd gone right at the first three-way intersection, and then at the cross intersection after that they'd gone left. That meant that now, they were going the opposite direction to where the device was.

"Hey, we've totally messed this up," said Mana.

"Messed up what, exactly?" Uluru replied.

"Don't give me that crap. We're going in a completely different direction from where the device is supposed to be. We came here to

interrupt the ceremony, so what's the point of going somewhere the device isn't?"

"It's okay."

"Not a single thing about this is okay."

"If Uluru says it's okay, then it's okay. Uluru's the big sister of Premium Sachiko, the magical girl of luck. And also the big sister of Sorami Nakano, who knows whatever's inside something closed. So there's no way a path Uluru chose could be wrong, and obviously Uluru would know what's inside a maze."

Mana could just decide that everything Uluru said was crazy and bring her to the device, even if it meant dragging her by the ear. Mana didn't do that, though. She looked at Uluru's notes about the maze in silence.

It made Mana remember how she'd been herself, looking up to Hana Gekokujou, who was working as an inspector, and saying to their father, "I'm gonna become a cool inspector like her!" He'd been so glad. She knew this wasn't the time to be letting sentimentality guide her, but she just couldn't bring herself to stop Uluru.

"Besides, look around," said Uluru.

Mana surveyed the area. There were screens and speakers interspersed throughout, and each and every one was decorated with rings made from origami paper. Her eyes began sliding to the images on the screens, but she hurriedly averted them. "It's not like this is any different from anywhere else. So what about it?"

"It's weird that it's no different, isn't it? If this place had nothing to do with anything, they wouldn't have to leave screens and speakers here, right? So then isn't all this here 'cause they don't want us coming here?"

"What if it's a fake-out or something?"

"There'd be no point. The Osk Faction was guarding this area. They know we have maps, so it'd be useless to put these as a trick in some random spot."

All of it sounded quite reasonable. Mana put her hand to her chin and considered the validity of it, but Uluru interrupted her by shoving her notes at her.

"We don't have the time to be thinking about it! Come on, let's go, now!" Uluru scooped up Mana in her arms. Ignoring Mana's cries of protest, she set off at a run again. The card soldiers followed after her, and before long, they came to a sort of small room. There

were rows of equipment with a table in the middle, and the three magical girls sitting around it leaped to their feet.

Mana and Uluru instantly overwhelmed them. This was partly because they outnumbered the other girls, but even apart from that, the trio of magical girls were weak. Maybe they weren't fighters.

"These girls are all good with machines," said Uluru.

"Good with machines?" Mana asked. "So then why weren't they deployed at the device?"

"Uluru heard just being good with machines won't help at all with the device…and hey, this room."

"What about this room?"

"Maybe they're sending the sound and video from here?"

Mana looked around again. It wasn't that mages were always bad with machines, but her specialty was pharmaceuticals. She wasn't informed on the subject of machinery. She frankly couldn't tell what the equipment was for just by looking, but it did sort of look like something in that vein.

"You can't tell?" Mana asked.

"Uluru doesn't know about that stuff."

"Useless."

"There you go again!"

"Oh yeah, some of the playing cards are good at that, aren't they? Try asking them now," Mana suggested.

Uluru clapped her hands and said something to the card soldiers. From among the unit, a few of the diamond suit timidly came forward.

◇ CQ Angel Hamuel

The fight in the outside area was winding down. The majority of the Shufflin IIs who'd tried to get inside had been won over by the enemy, and those who hadn't had been defeated. The mercenary unit headed by Pfle and what had to be about 10 or 20 percent of the Shufflin IIs, judging from the whole, had gone into the ruins, but their fate was already about to turn in a cruel direction.

Of the magical girls outside, those who seemed to have the rank of unit leader were giving instructions. They were saying very nasty-sounding things, like "We're going inside to eliminate the intruders."

About all that was left now was the question of how to escape. But at this point, even that would be difficult. And in addition to difficult, it was pointless. Even if Hamuel did escape, what would become of her?

She had no choice but to somehow get those inside to ruin the ceremony before Puk Puck caught up to them. In a state near despair, Hamuel opened her eyes and dropped them to her magical phone. It read: They're making a big fuss, saying to follow after Lady Puk, pon, followed by, What's going on here, pon?

Hamuel furrowed her eyebrows. "What do you mean, 'What's going on here, pon?'" she whispered into the phone, taking care not to be noticed by anyone around.

A new message came on the screen: I can hear Uluru's voice from the speakers, pon. She's saying the magical girls under Puk Puck's command all have to hurry away from the ruins, pon. Just what's the meaning of this, giving an order like that now, pon?

That was when Hamuel realized the singing playing on the speakers had turned to muttering. The voice sounded scratchy, so she'd been slow to notice. And it wasn't that the voice was muttery and scratchy, it just sounded like the signal wasn't great. The sound quality was very bad.

Before she could hear the words clearly, Hamuel plugged her ears.

This wasn't the time to be wondering what was happening or why. Whatever it was, Fal was being deceived. In other words, what Uluru was saying was a lie. However she'd taken over the speakers, that didn't matter right now. Only the phenomenon before Hamuel was an issue. Despite Uluru's going through so much to get this lie out to them, since all the enemy forces had earplugs and wouldn't listen, her lie remained useless. The Shufflin IIs who had just become allies were trying to get away from the ruins and quarreling with the others, but if that was all they'd get out of it, then there wasn't much point.

Hamuel turned her communicator on. Setting the target to every single person she'd met who was gathered in these ruins—magical girls presently in the clearing, all the magical girls of the Osk Faction she'd seen during the course of these battles, all the Shufflin IIs she'd brought, Mana, Pfle and her subordinates, and, finally, with a thought of *Maybe*, Lethe as well—she moved her communicator close to the speaker. If she could make it so that

everyone could hear Uluru's voice, maybe she could make the Puk Faction withdraw.

She inched forward bit by tiny bit so she wouldn't be noticed, and then, right when she was just about there, someone called her to a stop.

"What're you doing?"

It was a sweet, charming voice, one she had no way of resisting. Before she could even wonder who it was, she moved. The feeling of her heart being encroached upon made Hamuel scared. Her desire to just give in like this terrified her to her core. If she yielded now, there would be no point anymore.

She was about to fly off, but right before her feet left the ground, she felt an awful impact on her back and was knocked down. Facedown on the ground, she tilted her head to look behind her. There was a spear stabbed in her back. It was one of the spade-shaped spears the Shufflin spades used. She could see the feet of the person approaching. Those feet were so charming and pretty, they made you want to kiss them. Ready to consume every last drop of strength she had left, Hamuel brought her face close to the mic.

"Lethe has lost. The Puk Faction has gained control of the area outside the ruins."

She spewed blood into her mic. The spear in her back stabbed hard, breaking her ribs, burrowing deep in her flesh to pierce her organs. Hamuel spat blood once more, but she still didn't let go of her microphone. "Puk Puck is now…entering the ruins."

She was kicked away. The magical phone rolled away. Hamuel's vision spun, and she came to a stop on her back. She was looking up at the blue sky. She coughed up blood, and it rolled out of her mouth down to her ears. Adjusting the settings of her communicator, she made it so her voice would reach no one, and, abruptly, her consciousness faded. Though she felt like she would go mad with pain, that faded, too.

The magical girls present cheered with joy. As their chants of "Puk Puck!" echoed around, Hamuel's blood-smeared lips relaxed slightly, and she smiled. If they thought they'd won, that was a big mistake. With that parting thought in her mind, Hamuel closed her eyes.

◇ **Princess Deluge**

The magical girl in white nimbly evaded Pfle's charge, slicing with her *naginata*-like weapon as she passed by. Neither Deluge's ice arrows nor Dark Cutie's shadows hit their target. Pfle barely managed to smack the weapon with her left hand. By hitting it and not just blocking it, she shifted Snow White's slice to the side and avoided a fatal wound. But her left hand was sliced in two in a ragged slash that went all the way to her wrist. Pfle didn't make a single sound, though, racing along on her wheelchair. She must have been prepared to lose her hand when she'd first rocketed off. Even if Snow White could read minds, there was a limit to her ability to respond to such sudden movements.

Snow White tried to follow Pfle, but Deluge cut between them. Snow White's weapon and Deluge's trident clashed, and Snow White crouched down. That moment, Cannon Catherine pointed her cannon, but right before she fired, Snow White yelled, "Don't!"

She couldn't stop it now. Dark Cutie had sent a shadow rope crawling along the floor and up Catherine's armor to wrap around the barrel of the cannon, but Catherine hadn't noticed. The instant she fired, Dark Cutie pulled the rope, and the angle of the cannon turned ninety degrees to fire its cannonball at Blade Brenda beside her, and burst, and the two sets of black armor were blasted away in a small-scale explosion. Dark Cutie's rope turned into a snake that slithered over the pair's armor, tying them up together, and then the snake turned into a hard chain that kept them firmly on the spot.

In the thickly billowing white smoke, Snow White opened up the bag hanging from her waist with her left hand, while her right held her *naginata*, blade pointed at Deluge. She was about ten meters away. It couldn't be called distant for either Dark Cutie or Deluge. It was within their range.

Dark Cutie muttered, "She's coming. I'll leave her to you, okay?"

"Shouldn't we fight her together?"

"Unfortunately, we can't." Dark Cutie turned aside to avoid the spear a Shufflin thrust at her from behind. Its owner followed it, and one more after that, and then yet another, as spade Shufflins appeared. Their numbers were jack, queen, and king. They had an abnormal light in their eyes, indicating they'd abandoned the Osk Faction and were working for Puk Puck.

Deluge readied herself in a sideways stance and whispered to

Dark Cutie, “Didn’t you want to fight Snow White?”

“Right now, Snow White is not a heroine.”

Deluge got the gist. “I might…kill Snow White, though,” she said.

“If that’s what happens, it’s fine.”

“You’re okay with that?”

“You’re a heroine, too.”

Deluge didn’t reply. She grabbed a pill and swallowed it. “Luxury Mode: On!”

Deluge shoved into Snow White, then swung her trident a second, a third time.

At the same time, Dark Cutie fired a shadow arrow from a shadow bow, and then she turned the arrow into a throwing rope and wrapped it around a rock, yanking the rope to pull her in a forward roll to avoid the spear coming at her. When a Shufflin stabbed a spear down toward her, she instantly bounded to her feet and lashed out with a high kick, which the remaining Shufflin raised her spear to block, but she couldn’t handle the force, and both Shufflins slammed into the wall together, making wide cracks in its patterned face.

Dark Cutie folded her right hand into a complex shape to make a shadow puppet. A Shufflin thrust her spear forward in an attempt to prevent her, and she rolled away, rushing backward. The three Shufflins raised their spears to pursue her.

Deluge paid them no mind, stopping to turn back to Snow White.

Dark Cutie and Deluge had only just met. It wasn’t as if they’d gone through tons of mock battles together, like the Pure Elements had. If they were to coordinate, it would be improvised. On the other end, the acquaintance of Snow White and the Shufflins had been similarly short. But Snow White could read the hearts of not only her enemies but her allies as well. Deluge had seen her manage to coordinate with magical girls she’d only just met with no prior discussion.

So it would be best to divide things up.

Before Deluge could thrust in, Snow White stepped back. If Deluge’s mind was being read, then she would fight in such a way that her mind being read wouldn’t pose a problem.

Deluge didn’t really feel like she’d abandoned all hesitation. She still felt hesitant. When she’d still been relying on Bluebell’s—Lapis

Lazuline's—candies, she had never wavered about anything. She'd been satisfied to put her anger and sadness into swinging her trident. No matter how suffocating and painful it was, she'd been able to keep wielding her weapon in search of a possible salvation.

She couldn't swing her trident mindlessly anymore. She found herself thinking about the enemies in front of her. She found herself thinking about the people she'd killed with her own hands. She just couldn't help wondering why she'd done such things, or if there had been any other way. Maybe it was better to be controlled by someone else. It was her inability to think for herself and decide for herself that had caused her to suffer, but she didn't know what to do. She didn't know what the right thing to do was.

Deluge's mind was swirling, and she couldn't think straight as she was just swept along, nor did she know where she was trying to go. She didn't know.

Snow White was in front of her. She was strong, the one they called the Magical-Girl Hunter. Her eyes were locked on Deluge, blade pointed at her. She didn't hesitate or waver like Deluge. That was why Princess Inferno had asked Snow White to hunt the bad magical girls.

Deluge bit her lip.

Despite that promise she'd made to Inferno, Snow White was on the bad magical girls' side. Deluge's own worries aside, this was something she couldn't accept. She pictured Inferno in her mind's eye. She'd always been cheerful, tugging them all behind her as she raced onward. Full of energy and never showing weakness, right up until her death she'd had a smile on her face. Now Deluge could understand that she'd been putting up a tough front. Not out of vanity, wanting to make herself look stronger. It had come from a desire to keep her own fear from those left behind, lest it weaken them.

Inferno had been killed. Tempest, Quake—all of them had been killed. And Prism Cherry—despite being the weakest of them all, she'd come back to save them, not taking a step back even when up against powerful magical girls. She'd been killed, too. There had been no reason that the Pure Elements had to die. "Because they were caught up in some Magical Kingdom conflict" didn't count. And if it did, then the Magical Kingdom should just disappear.

Deluge yelled. Three stabs in a row, a downward swing, a front kick paired with ice arrows, Snow White dodged all of it. She was

reading Deluge's heart. In that case—Deluge grabbed a handful of pills and swallowed them down.

"Luxury Mode: Burst!"

A brightly burning flame came from deep within her to spread through her whole body. The goings-on of her mind, the will to think or feel, diminished, while instead, her body was insisting, *"I want to move! Make me move!"*

Deluge knew Snow White's weakness. When they'd fought the Ace of Spades, its physical ability had been too much for her to keep up with, and despite being able to read its mind, she hadn't been able to avoid its attacks. When Deluge activated Luxury Mode: Burst, her physical abilities would rival those of an ace of spades. Snow White's movements stopped being easy and casual, and now she was using care and desperation to turn aside each and every one of Deluge's thrusts with her weapon.

That wasn't Snow White's only weakness. Deluge knew she'd struggled against Dark Cutie's shadows. Snow White was weak to enemies that attacked on autopilot and didn't have hearts. That made sense, since they had no hearts to read. Deluge made her ice arrows rotate around herself. If she aimed them to fire, her heart would be read. Having them move automatically on simple trajectories would make things harder for Snow White.

Deluge thrust, swiped. Snow White didn't even try to meet the trident with her own weapon, crouching, jumping off the ground and then the wall. Deluge fired arrows at the spot where she thought Snow White would land to freeze it, but Snow White kicked off the other wall to slice at Deluge instead. Deluge stepped back to avoid it, tensing her legs. Time to push forward.

When Deluge lunged forward for three continuous stabs with the ultra-power-up of Luxury Mode: Burst behind them, all Snow White could do was defend. She avoided the first strike, dodged the second, and blocked the third with her weapon, and when she tried to backstep again, she lost her balance—because her weapon wouldn't move. Deluge had aimed for the moment when her trident and Ruler made contact, lowering the temperature of her trident's tips. The blades were frozen, stuck to Ruler, and with the strength of Deluge's arms bracing it, the weapon refused to be pulled back.

Deluge held the handle of her trident in both hands and yanked it backward with all her might. Snow White couldn't fight it and released her weapon, backing away without it. She tried to pull a

fire extinguisher from her bag, but Deluge had anticipated that. In the blink of an eye, she closed the distance between them and kicked away the extinguisher. With a clanging noise, the large fire extinguisher rolled away. Deluge raised the temperature of her trident's blades and swung it to release Snow White's weapon. It clanged, too, rolling off in the opposite direction from the extinguisher.

Snow White thrust her hand into her bag to pull something out. But whatever she was trying to get, Deluge moved faster.

She didn't want to fight with Snow White. But she couldn't be thinking that now. She thought of the Pure Elements. When she thought about them, she could do the impossible. She could pull off things she never would have been able to do otherwise. If she turned her mind to those girls who had died for no good reason at all, there was nothing Deluge couldn't do. Even Dark Cutie had said it—Deluge was a heroine.

Princess Deluge swung her spear upward, while at the same time, Snow White pulled something out of her bag. Deluge was about to lunge straight at her, but she paused, just for an instant. Snow White had drawn a familiar scimitar. It was the scimitar that Inferno had wielded during their mock battles and their fights with Disrupters.

But Deluge went for it anyway. She brought her trident down, gouging into the flesh of Snow White's shoulder as she tried to twist away, while Snow White's thrust pierced deep into Deluge's side. Deluge staggered, tensing her legs to keep on her feet. Snow White recovered from the blow to her shoulder and swung the scimitar, cutting deep into Deluge's chest.

Deluge felt like she was burning up. She dropped her trident, her right hand swiping through air, and when she lost her balance and fell, Snow White sliced her again, this time through her back. Her legs tangled as she went down, and her hands clawed at the ground, but all she grabbed was liquid—her own blood. Her field of vision flipped upside down and grew darker. In the dimness, she could see Bluebell Candy. *They could have let me choose what my final vision would be*, she thought wryly as her consciousness plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER 10
ALL FOR YOU

◇ **Pfle**

Contact with Cockle, the magical girl Pfle had dispatched to the device, had cut off. Pfle had thought that with her magic to get into cracks, she'd be able to go straight to the device, but it seemed she'd been captured or killed en route. With this, one of the avenues to victory Pfle had been considering had been blocked.

This eliminated the lazy option of letting Lethe defeat Puk Puck for her, blocking yet another possible avenue of victory. And then Puk Puck had gone into the ruins. Now that it had come to this, they were out of time. There were no longer any magical girls who could oppose Puk Puck.

And even Deluge and Dark Cutie, when you considered whom they were up against, would doubtless be caught in some tough battles. It would be best to abandon any delusional hopes that they might gallantly rush to save her. The most Pfle could do on that end was pray for their safety. For Fal's sake, she would add Snow White to her prayers, too.

Now then—the rest is up to circumstance.

Pfle put her hand on the door to the sanctum. Slowly, she pushed it open.

◇ **Yoshioka**

She found a place in the sheer rock wall where the slope wasn't as steep, and, making full use of her arms and legs, she reached the top. Pulling the binoculars from her backpack, she crawled on her stomach to look down over the basin below.

The magical girls had begun to clean up the area. It seemed

they didn't want to leave a mess around the ruins, perhaps out of respect to the First Mage, who had been Puk Puck's teacher. Of the Shufflin IIs, the combat-specialized spades must have all been taken away by Puk Puck, as not a single one remained outside. Only the Shufflin II diamonds, clubs, and hearts, plus a handful of Puk Puck's original subordinates left behind on watch, remained outside, dealing with what remained.

The ones left there would all be feeling sad, miserable, and awful. Despite how they all shared the desire to serve at Puk Puck's side, some would have that wish granted, and some would not. They wouldn't be able to accept that some got to accompany her into the ruins just because they were good fighters. Puk Puck herself was incomparably strong, so she should choose her company based on loyalty, not on strength. They couldn't be witness to the decisive moment when the device was activated. *"What emptiness, what sadness."* They were surely thinking something of that nature. Even with the eyes of an outsider, she could see their dissatisfaction plainly.

They all trudged around, picking up garbage and cleaning up the now still bodies of magical girls.

And the original subordinates who'd been abandoned here had to be feeling even more hopeless indignation than the Shufflin IIs. They'd served for way longer than the Shufflin IIs, who'd just started following Puk Puck—but despite that, the spade Shufflin IIs had stolen their places. These girls made no effort to disguise their anger as they ordered the Shufflin IIs around arrogantly, criticizing their work and kicking them down while making no move to help, gazing at the monitors that stood around to be entranced by Puk Puck.

Yoshioka sadly stroked her hair. Puk Puck loved everyone equally, and was loved equally by everyone—but among her subordinates, disparities were growing between those magical girls who were simply being worked to the bone, those who were throwing their weight around and wouldn't work, and those who'd been chosen as the honor guard. But even those with mounting discontent in their hearts could not voice dissent with Puk Puck's decision, and now they would just suck it up and pick up the garbage. This was modern society in a nutshell, right here.

Hearing the sound of something smashing, Yoshioka looked over to see that a screen had fallen. Rather, it had been knocked

over. A magical girl in a blue outfit had her right leg raised, standing on her left beside the fallen screen. The girls left outside all looked at her, but the magical girl in blue ignored their looks and came over to the next screen to kick it down.

Yells rang out. The club Shufflin IIs raised their batons, while diamond Shufflin IIs readied their tasers and birdlime guns. Yoshioka restrained her pounding heart as she watched the situation unfold.

“She’s with the Osk Faction!” one of the girls shouted, pointing at the magical girl in question.

A heart Shufflin II leaped at her. She nimbly dodged, and something rolled out to hit the ground. It was a beautiful candy. The heart Shufflin II pushed herself up sluggishly, looking around, and tilted her head. It didn’t seem as if she was going to fight anymore.

“Watch out! She’s using some kind of magic!” someone hollered.

The Shufflin IIs surged forward, and the blue magical girl slipped between them. When she passed by a Shufflin II, she would touch their body, and each time, a shining candy dropped out. After the candies were extracted from them, the Shufflin IIs stopped on the spot, looking around in confusion.

One magical girl spread the dragonfly wings on her back to leap into the air, coming down again until she just about skimmed the ground to circle at low altitude. The girl in blue wasn’t letting the group of Shufflin IIs lay a single finger on her as she went around the battlefield. The girl with dragonfly wings stealthily circled around behind the girl in blue, and from there accelerated in a straight line. She dived to tackle the blue girl from behind, but when her arms reached out, they swiped through air. The girl in blue had squatted down on the spot to avoid her.

There’d been no sign at all that she’d noticed the sneak attack coming. She hadn’t given so much as a glance at the winged girl, but she’d avoided the attack as if there were eyes on her back.

The dragonfly-wing girl rose in the air and looked down on the ruins from above.

On the world below, the other magical girls seemed to be doing everything they could to fight back, but the blue magical girl acted as if they were nothing. Balls of light came at the girl in blue from all four sides, but none of them connected. Some threw rocks or

even sloshed mud at her, but even those didn't hit. With every move the blue magical girl made, candies dropped out, and in the blink of an eye there were more and more people out of the fight. The moment she touched people, even those of the Puk Faction who weren't Shufflin IIs, they fell and didn't so much as twitch.

The magical girl with the dragonfly wings watched in frustration. Yoshioka wondered what she would do if she were in that girl's position. The girl in blue was clearly a combat master. Even with everyone ganging up on her, they couldn't even touch her with a fingertip, never mind hurting her. Instead of continuing to fight, it would be best for the others to report this inside the ruins.

It seemed the girl with dragonfly wings had reached the same conclusion. She pulled her magical phone out of her pocket, turned it on to make a call, and brought it to her mouth, but then immediately dodged something that came hurtling in her direction.

It was a rock. A big rock, about the size of an adult's head, had been thrown at her. While avoiding the rock, she rose even higher, bringing her magical phone to her mouth again, probably to explain what was going on below her, but as she looked down at the ground, right there, her eyes met those of the blue magical girl.

The girl she'd thought had been on the ground just a moment ago was right there in front of her, in arm's reach.

Yoshioka had seen the whole thing. That rock hadn't been thrown to hit the winged magical girl, it had been thrown to create footing. The girl in blue had raced up the rock face that surrounded the basin, jumping off the peak of the wall in a wide leap, then kicked off the rock she'd thrown to bound a step higher into the sky. It was an incredible physical feat—unbelievable, even for a magical girl.

The winged girl tried to escape farther up into the air, but she didn't make it in time. The blue girl grabbed her ankle, and a candy rolled from there, and she lost her balance in midair and fell. The girl in blue held the winged girl as they fell through the air, and right before they landed, she bounced off the wall to dampen the impact, then laid the winged girl's body down on the ground.

Yoshioka watched the exploits of the girl in blue with flushed cheeks. This was an action spectacle worth watching. There was unfortunately very little stimulation to be had from serving an incarnation of one of the Three Sages.

◇ Uluru

"Agh, jeez! You're so slow! Run faster!"

"I told you not to force magical-girl standards on me!"

Surrounded by their group of Shufflin IIs, Uluru ran. Mana was slow, so Uluru was pulling her arm, but she was still too slow. Had there been any point to what Uluru had done, or hadn't there? She had no clue if it'd had any effect at all. They were probably off from the central area, but she didn't really understand how off they were. The one thing she did know was that if they didn't run now, they were sure to be in trouble.

The cracked walls, the broken screens, the sooty floor, and, most of all, the fallen magical girls. The more they ran, the more

marks of destruction they saw, the kind that made you want to look away. Uluru squeezed the hand in hers harder, and Mana's hand squeezed hers back even harder. Right now, even the warmth of Mana's hand was something to be grateful for. It supported Uluru's weak heart as it was about ready to snap.

They ran and ran, just ran onward, stomping over the hesitation and indecisiveness in her heart—

"Snow White!"

She was there—Snow White, the one she'd been looking and looking for all this time. Uluru had been running and running, relying on their promise to get revenge together. Snow White was the one thing that stood alone inside Uluru, in the place where she'd been empty.

Snow White was raising her weapon. But it looked like she was so tired, even lifting it was the most she could do, shoulders heaving, knees trembling. The dark red dirtying her white costume might not have just been the blood of her enemies.

The one lying at her feet had to be her enemy. It was an aqua-colored magical girl with a trident. She was facedown in a puddle of blood, and Uluru couldn't tell if she was alive or dead.

Snow White looked at Uluru and Mana. Her expression was saying, *"There's more new enemies,"* and Uluru clenched her jaw. Snow White scowled, lowered her weapon, and ran away.

"Snow White! Wait! If you don't wait, Lady Puk'll be mad at you!"

Uluru had been told Snow White would functionally nullify Uluru's magic. The first time Snow White had heard Uluru lying in the park, she'd been the one person to immediately recover and act normally. But Uluru remembered. That time, Snow White had thrown herself down before getting up again. She'd reacted to Uluru's lie, and then she'd added in what she'd heard from Uluru's mind and thought about it to take action. So then there was a point in Uluru's lying. Even if it was just for an instant, if she could make Snow White believe it, it would slow her down that much.

Uluru's lie froze Snow White for just an instant, and for the ace of spades running with Uluru, an instant was enough of an opportunity. She caught up to Snow White and swung her spear. Snow White blocked it, but, because she was wounded, it wasn't easy for her at all. She barely avoided the second, then the third strike, and then the other card soldiers caught up and joined in to

attack her.

Uluru yelled, “If you kill Snow White, Lady Puk’ll hate you!”

When Snow White could endure the card soldiers’ attacks no longer, Mana tossed out a magical binding rope. Though Snow White avoided it, she couldn’t avoid the body slam from the ace of spades that came after it, and then the other card soldiers piled on her as well, pushing her to the ground.

While heaving ragged breaths, Snow White looked up at Uluru. Her eyes were tinged with hatred, and Uluru didn’t want to be looked at like that, but looking away would be even worse. She glared back at Snow White and raised her fist, then lowered it without doing anything. Uluru realized she couldn’t do anything to her now.

Uluru jabbed Mana with her elbow. “Hey, what do we do?”

“This isn’t the time to be asking that!” Mana rushed up to the magical girl lying in a puddle of blood and began treating her wounds. It seemed like she was alive, more or less. Uluru felt more and more at a loss. Snow White was glaring at her, with the card soldiers continuing to hold her down, patiently waiting for Uluru’s instructions.

“Do you mind?”

Uluru turned back. There was a magical girl in blue. Maybe Uluru had seen her before, maybe not—she couldn’t really say. Uluru raised her rifle and opened her mouth to tell a lie, but the blue magical girl hurriedly put her hands up and shook her head.

“Whoa there, I’m not your enemy. Maybe I startled you by popping out all of a sudden, but that’s just how the magic works, so forgive me. Oh, though it’s not my magic.”

“What? Who the heck are you?”

“Calm down.” The girl in blue approached Snow White and stroked her cheek. Something dropped from the spot she touched and landed on the ground with a *plink*. It was a pretty candy that shone a rainbow of colors. Snow White’s face froze in surprise, and then a sort of moan leaked out from deep in her throat. She opened her mouth to say something, but her eyelids fell, her arms weakly dangling as her face hit the floor.

“You killed her?!” cried Uluru.

“I didn’t kill her. She’s just knocked out, okay?” the girl in blue replied.

Snow White’s transformation came undone. Lying there was not

the magical girl Snow White, but a human girl in a school uniform.

Uluru hurriedly gave orders to the card soldiers. “Hey! If you hold down someone who’s not a magical girl like that, you’ll hurt her! If you do that, Lady Puk’ll hate you!”

“Yep, yep, you got it. Here goes,” the blue magical girl said in an incredibly casual manner, and then she soundlessly approached the card soldiers holding Snow White down as well, reaching out to stroke each of their cheeks with her fingers. She moved so smoothly, there was no opportunity to stop her. One candy rolled out for each soldier, and every one of them looked at the others as if they’d come to their senses.

“Well, that was the plan. Understand now?” asked the girl in blue.

“Like I said: Who the heck are you?!” Uluru snapped back.

“I’m on your side, okay? And that gets me these things.” The blue magical girl instantly created candies between her fingers. Or maybe she hadn’t created them, but revealed things that had been there to begin with, like a stage magician.

While peeling the card soldiers away from Snow White, the blue magical girl let the rainbow candies fall into her palm. “It’s a crystallization of the anger and hate right before death. Use these, and you can do some fun stuff… Well, that’s a task for me and the cards. If you guys stick around, you’ll be in danger. Since you’ve got some wounded, you should prolly take a side route out to avoid things.”

◇ Puk Puck

With Puk Puck in their center, the group of magical girls was rapidly making progress toward the device sanctum.

They’d already gained control of the outside area. If enemy reinforcements were coming, it’d take a little more time for them to reach the device. Puk Puck wanted to have complete control over the inside of the ruins by then as well. To that end, she was going back to the device, where the enemy was bound to be heading, to solidify the defenses. On the way, she picked up the fighting magical girls one after another, and her group got bigger and bigger. Since the group getting too big would make it hard to move around, she asked the others to clean up the ruins while her main

unit of ten escorted her quickly onward. The farther they headed, the worse the signs of battle got. Plushes were scorched, paper rings were burning, and screens had burst into flame. What a horrible thing to do. Filled with sadness, Puk Puck continued onward.

When she heard a group of card soldiers were coming from up ahead, she figured she should stand in the lead. If Puk Puck stood at the head and made every single one of the enemies who came for them friends, everyone could get along without getting hurt. That was how she'd been making more friends all this time. Those who'd just been fighting were now swearing absolute allegiance to Puk Puck, too.

When she went to stand at the front with that thought in mind, she was stopped.

"Please wait," said one of Puk's friends. "Something's wrong."

"Really?"

When she looked at the card soldiers coming toward them, they were angry, and they didn't seem like they would listen to what other people were saying. Even when Puk Puck spread her arms and said, "Be my friend!" they got mad instead and came at her in a rage. At that point, Puk Puck's friends were forced to fight back. A chaotic battle began in the hallway. Though Puk Puck's side totally outnumbered them, the hallway was so narrow, they couldn't bring all their forces to bear, and the enemies had so much energy, Puk's side couldn't quite suppress them. A magical girl in black armor had come out in front and was blocking the attacks from the card soldiers.

The card soldiers kept repeating the process of fighting, then pulling out red candies and swallowing them. Puk Puck didn't quite understand what they were doing, but those candies had to be the problem.

"Maybe we should take the candies away from them?" said Puk.

"The enemy's numbers are few anyway. We'll take them out quickly."

It was true that Puk's side outnumbered them, but that also meant they had to hold back their magic, or it'd quickly result in friendly fire. The enemy's morale was frighteningly high, too. With an ace of spades at the head, their spears stabbed and clubs bashed, and Puk's team couldn't quite manage them.

"Maybe Puk should go up front, after all," said Puk.

"Please wait—please wait, just a bit."

“Hmm… Puk can’t wait, after all!” She couldn’t be so easygoing about this, thinking they could just move on ahead after suppressing the enemy. If something happened to the device, she couldn’t fulfill her goal. Puk Puck ran. She ignored the voices calling for her to stop. Jumping off the wall, she hit the opposite wall and jumped again, cracking the walls whenever she hit as she zigzagged toward over the heads of the card soldiers. She stepped on the head of the ace that was jabbing her spear upward, making it cave into her body as she jumped, crossing over the card soldiers in a single bound.

“You guys handle the rest!” And with that, Puk Puck ran off without looking back.

◇ Shadow Gale

At last, the device was almost done. Now there was just one part of Shadow Gale’s modification process to go. Even she didn’t know herself how much time it would take from here.

She set both owner and user to Puk Puck, and made the purpose of use the storage of magical girls. All the magical girls were delighted, hugging each other and crying out in joy. They were delighted to serve, to be able to work for Puk Puck, the greatest leader, the ultimate magical girl, the embodiment of beauty, the absolute ruler, and they wept at having fulfilled her wish, rejoicing when they imagined the words of praise they were about to receive.

But then something strange happened. From the guardroom in front of the sanctum could be heard yells and shrieks, smacking and bashing. The sounds rapidly became louder. Was the enemy there? The magical girls were tense, gulping audibly as they kept their eyes glued to the entrance.

The door opened a crack and a magical girl slid in. She closed the door with her hand behind her and smiled at them. “Hmm… So has it been completed or not?”

With dust wafting around her, she came forward on a twisted, creaking wheelchair, a bird-shaped eye patch concealing one eye. Shadow Gale knew her. She was sure she did, but since Puk Puck’s orders occupied just about all the space in her head, it took a bit of time to remember. In the meantime, the magical girl in the

wheelchair was nodding along and listening attentively to everything the members of the device restoration team were saying, prompting them and making comments in a very honest and sincere-seeming manner.

Shadow Gale knew—that girl was very far from honest and sincere.

Shadow Gale cut in front of the others, taking a step forward to glare at the girl in the wheelchair. “What have you come here to do, miss? Are you here to take me back?” She figured that if so, it should be fine to hit or kick the other girl. The others also showed that they were ready to resist, each taking tools in hand and adopting fighting stances as if to say, *“If you’re going to fight, then bring it.”*

The magical girl in the wheelchair—Pfle—slowly looked around the area and shook her head. “Why are you getting so aggressive? Would I come here to take you back? At this point, I’m with all of you, a friend. After coming in contact with the great magical girl Lady Puk Puck, I’ve finally gained an opportunity to change. If I had let this chance pass me by, I’m sure I would have remained the sort of trash you describe as I met my end. How grateful I am! So grateful I can hardly see from the tears in my eyes.”

Shadow Gale knew sickeningly well that this was someone who used words to deceive people and couldn’t be trusted. But she also thought that if Pfle had touched Puk Puck’s greatness, maybe even she could actually change. Shadow Gale hesitated a moment.

Pfle elegantly waved her right hand. “I won’t say to trust me. Trust Lady Puk Puck. There is not a magical girl in existence who wouldn’t change after coming in contact with her—even someone twisted to the core like myself.”

The other magical girls were whispering to each other, “Well, that’s right,” and “Yeah, true.” And Shadow Gale thought she was right, too.

But—she was about to worry over it more when a gentle hand was laid on her shoulder. Pfle’s hand pat-patted her there. “We don’t have the time. Think about Lady Puk Puck. We can’t be wasting time on these things now. Have you finished the device?”

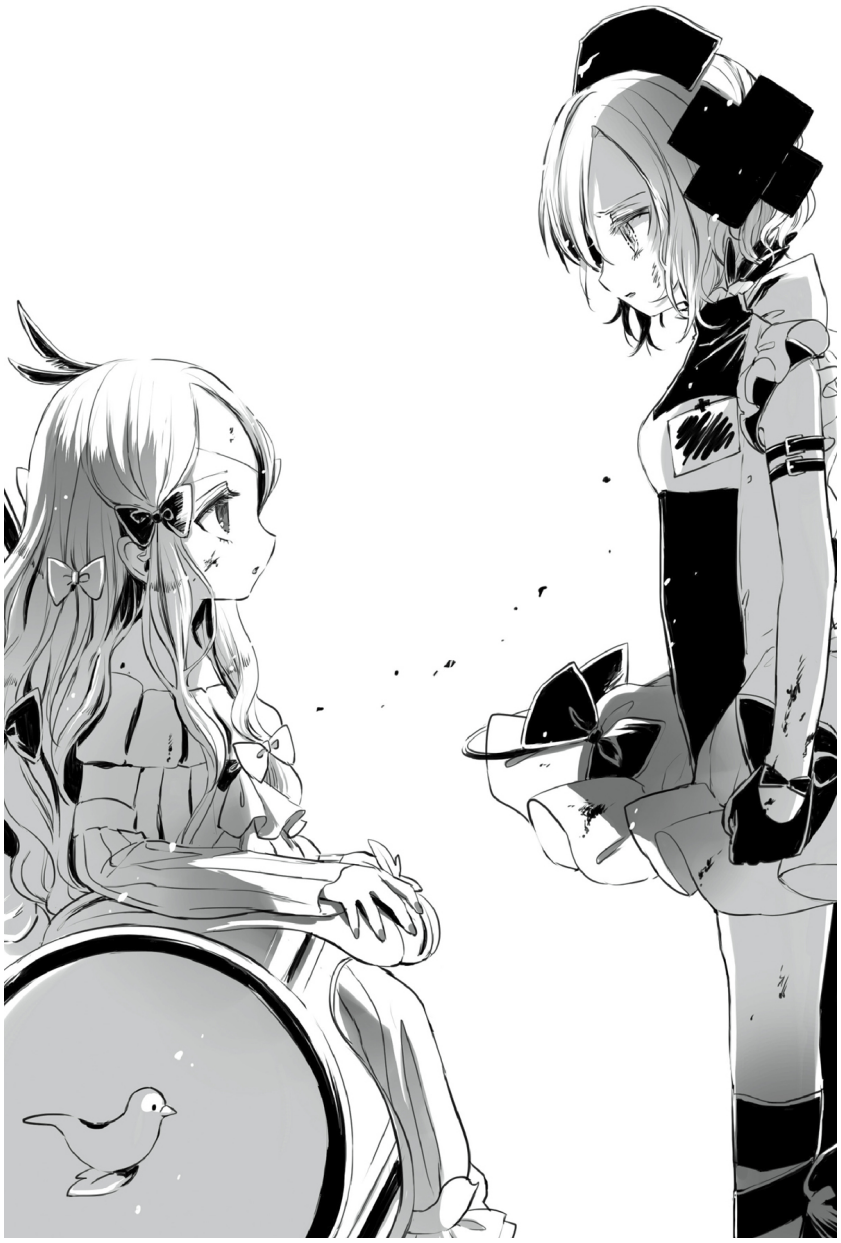
“No, I still have to do the finishing touches…,” Shadow Gale said. “I have one more process to complete before we activate it. But I don’t quite know how much time that’ll take…”

Pfle’s eyes narrowed. It was slight, but lines came together in

her brow. “You’ve completed the settings as well?”

“Yes, it’s set for Lady Puk Puck’s use.”

“I heard that she…Lady Puk Puck also had Premium Sachiko’s contract. Might you know what happened to that?”



“I’m holding on to it. She told me to use it if needed.”

“Show it to me.”

“But—”

“It’s no issue if I just look, is it? You may hold it.”

Pfle’s eyes scanned rapidly over the rows of small characters on the contract, and then she nodded. “Hmm… There’s no helping it. Being up against the wall like this… Mamori, the time to use this contract is now.”

“Huh? But Lady Puk Puck said not to use it until she ordered it.”

“There’s only one more process left, so if not now, then when do you plan to use it? I’ve come here on orders from Lady Puk Puck, so there’s no issue, is there?” Pfle turned to the magical girls behind Shadow Gale, murmuring. “Ladies! You’ve done quite well! Now it’s time to prepare for the time of Lady Puck’s arrival!”

In response to Pfle’s announcement, the magical girls all yelled, “Woo!” in unison, pumping their right arms.

They all returned to their posts to get the device activated, and Shadow Gale was left alone. Most people would think it was okay to trust Pfle on this. It should have been okay, but Shadow Gale couldn’t fully trust her. Kanoe Hitokouji—Pfle—would make you want to trust her. Her words, her attitude of honesty, her earnest bearing, her delicate appearance, her kind smile, the dignity that foolish people would call charisma—at a glance, these things made it seem you could trust her, and Shadow Gale had seen so many people be deceived, robbed, defeated, and made her prey that way.

Shadow Gale looked Pfle in the eye. “Miss, you’re not lying, are you?”

“Of course I’m not. The enemy is almost upon us. We must hurry. This is a job only you can do, Mamori. There’s no point in me doing it. If we fail to make it in time, then everything is over.” Her usual ironic smirk was absent. Her expression was seriousness itself. Pfle laid her hand over Shadow Gale’s. Shadow Gale reflexively tried to yank her hand back, but Pfle held it tight and would not let go. “You must believe in me, just for today. If my calculations are correct, the enemy will be coming very shortly. If the device hasn’t been activated by then, it’s over. Everything we’ve had and everything we will have will all be made as if it had never

been.”

Pfle slowly released her hand, and Shadow Gale belatedly noticed the heat in her own hand. Pfle’s eyes were locked on hers. Shadow Gale squeezed her eyes shut, clenched her teeth, and nodded firmly. She’d seen a burp-worthy amount of Pfle. If you added up all the times she’d been deceived or tricked or been had, it might go into the quintuple digits. And every time she was tricked, she swore in her heart that she’d never fall for it again, but then she fell for it anyway. She’d repeated the same thing over and over—and in the end, she still didn’t know what she should do to not be deceived anymore.

But she had gained one thing from it. When Kanoe Hitokouji was not lying, she could sometimes tell. And Pfle was sincerely afraid of the “enemy that was coming very shortly.” She was seriously thinking that if they didn’t make it in time, it would all be over.

Shadow Gale wasn’t going to trust Pfle. Shadow Gale trusted in her own life of continuous deception by Pfle. Looking back on her life brought back strong memories of just who Pfle was, and that pricked at Shadow Gale’s heart, but the image of Puk Puck dancing on the screen made her remember what she should do. Pfle’s situation was Pfle’s alone. What Shadow Gale had to do now was activate the device.

Shadow Gale put a check mark on each of the checkboxes on the contract, signing her own name at the end. Now they just had to activate the device.

◇ Puk Puck

Puk Puck ran her hardest. All sounds were background noise, all sights were static—right now she focused only on the safety of the device and moving her legs. She quickly got the feeling that her location and the place where she thought she was didn’t match, and she stopped. There were no friends around to lecture her and tell her, *“At times like these, if you have a magical phone, you can bring up a map right away.”* Puk Puck was left all alone in the vast ruins, and she felt so forlorn she just about cried, but she held back the tears.

She pulled her map out from her bag and spread it out. Her current location was indicated by a flashing spot on the magical

map. As expected, she was way off from where she'd thought she was. Puk Puck followed the map, cautiously so that this time, for sure, she wouldn't make any mistakes, but, still hurrying, she ran. She cheered herself up by thinking about how she was going to be together forever with lots of friends. But then she saw a screen that was slightly crooked and it bothered her, so she stopped to right it, and once it was good, she ran off again.

If Puk Puck ran for real, nobody could keep up, and she could catch up to anyone. Puk Puck was a speed queen: the eternal tag champion, so good she couldn't play without a handicap. Even if she got caught on piano wire strung up at her feet or got shocked by a stun gun, you couldn't stop Puk Puck. She ran and ran and kept running until she arrived at the sanctum where the device lay.

"Guys!"

The magical girls looked toward her all at once. Their expressions turned from anxiety to relief, and from relief to joy, and they all cheered as they gathered around Puk Puck.

"Lady Puk!"

"You were safe!"

"We heard the enemy was coming, so we hurried to get things ready!"

"What a relief! What a relief!"

"Look, please! We've made it so the device is ready to activate!"

When Shadow Gale yelled particularly loudly, "I made sure to sign the contract!" Puk Puck carefully stroked her head, then looked up at the device.

The device looked extremely large. It was as if it were a hundred meters tall, though there was no way it could be. It was like a four-legged beast about to leap atop them, but also like a vehicle of unclear purpose made by aliens or people from the future. Its metal of unknown origin had turned from black to red. You couldn't tell at a glance how thick the armor was, and it gave you a sense of its power, standing above magical girls. Gone was the pitiable impression from the time when they'd given up trying to make it work and thrown it away. Its whole mass signified the greatness of changing the world.

Speechless, Puk Puck spread her arms. One magical girl whisked to her side to hand her a bag filled with magical gems and say, "We've left enough for activation." The others immediately spread out so as not to touch Puk Puck's hands, making way. It was

a path of honor. She would make lots of friends and rebuild the Magical Kingdom, and everyone would say Puk Puck's name with respect and admiration, and everyone, even those who had been enemies up till yesterday and those who would have been enemies tomorrow, would become her friends.

She slowly approached it, one step, two. Three steps, four, and her heart was fluttering. A device created by the ultimate transcendent being, the First Mage, was frightening to Puk Puck, too. But they wouldn't get anywhere just sealing it away because they were scared. You needed the will to have courage and use it. The girls who watched from a distance didn't know the First Mage. They hadn't been afraid like Puk Puck or the Osk Faction—they'd touched the device and modified it, making it so it could be used. Maybe some would say they were only fearless because of their ignorance. But Puk had to acknowledge that their ignorance had brought the world a step forward. Puk Puck couldn't be taking the back seat to her friends now. If her friends were unafraid because they didn't know, then Puk Puck would know and conquer that fear.

Five steps, six steps, ten steps, twelve steps—Puk Puck sped up and up, and she was about to rush up to the device at a trot when her feet got tangled up and she fell forward, her hands hitting the ground. She heard a shriek from behind. Looking down, she saw her sock had slid all the way down and had tripped her up. It was the one that had been cut by Lethe. As she'd been running, the cut had slowly spread, slipping down her leg to trip her.

With a shy smile, she tried to stand. She wanted to put her friends at ease. But she staggered, then went down on her hands and dropped her bag, and the magic gems inside scattered everywhere. One of them rolled out, hitting the leg of the device with a *clink*. The device must have been truly delicately balanced. It wobbled and tilted.

Puk Puck looked up at the device that was about to fall toward her. She didn't panic. She just calmly tried to stand up. But the floor where her right hand sat crumbled, and her arm sank deep into the ground. When she tried to push at the floor with her left hand to dig it out, this time her left hand sunk in, too.

Bracing both legs, she tried to pull out her arms, but she was struck in the head and pitched forward. When the device had tilted, a wrench left on top of it had slid down and hit Puk Puck right in

the head.

Puk Puck understood. Someone was trying to make her dead. And she couldn't avoid it. She looked up at the device. Its overwhelming presence was looming steadily closer and closer. If you made a device created by the First Mage into a blunt weapon, even one of the Three Sages would be crushed.

"Guys! Don't come over here!" she yelled at the magical girls trying to run to her. If she was going to die no matter what, then at least she wanted to keep her friends from getting caught, too.

Puk Puck turned back to her friends and smiled brightly at them. "Thanks. I loved you all."

This was not a lie, and she wasn't putting up a strong front. Puk Puck had loved all of them. It was because of her love that she had managed to do her best and come all this way. Seeing Shadow Gale reaching out to her with a sad expression, Puk Puck waved back at her with a smile on her face.

She regretted that she would die before her goal was accomplished, and wondered in confusion how things had wound up like this, and that became Puk Puck's final thought.

◇ Pfle

Pfle emerged from where she'd been hiding behind a TV screen to quietly check and see how things were going. Puk Puck's order to stay back had stopped the magical girls from going to her. But just one had tried to rush up to Puk Puck, as if fighting against her own will. Recognizing that black nurse outfit, Pfle shot out in her wheelchair. She circled behind her and grabbed her arm, not letting her go any farther.

The spell had to have been cast particularly hard on Shadow Gale, since she was such an important figure in the ceremony—or was this an issue of her own nature? Whichever the case, Pfle couldn't have her get caught up in the accident and ruin everything, not when things were somehow going so well.

When Pfle had arrived in this room, she'd been out of options. They'd said they were almost ready to activate the device, and all that was left was Shadow Gale's task. Once Puk Puck arrived, it would all be over. If the Osk Faction forces came, they would try to do something about Shadow Gale, since hers was the one task left.

And even if Pfle were to fight the magical girls in the sanctum, there was no guarantee she'd win—and taking Shadow Gale to flee would be utterly impossible. In other words, no matter how the cards fell, she was in check.

But she hadn't despaired. There had been just one very thin path still left to her. Pfle read Premium Sachiko's contract and made a gamble. If it failed, then Shadow Gale would die a miserable death.

Premium Sachiko's magic was to offer incredible luck in exchange for using up all the rest of someone's luck in life and inviting a misfortune that they didn't want to happen. But it didn't bring certain death. Death came when death was the most unwelcome thing for the one who signed the contract, but ultimately what you got was misfortune. If that person saw something as a misfortune greater than death, that would happen instead. If she was afraid of someone else's demise more than her own, that someone else would die. Caught in the thrall of Puk Puck's powerful magic, it had been difficult for Shadow Gale to think about anything other than Puk Puck, and so the loss of Puk Puck was a far greater disaster than her own death.

This had been a gamble on Pfle's part. She'd read through all the fine print on Premium Sachiko's contract, layering hypothesis upon hypothesis, with no choice but to make a gamble based on that.

And it had paid off. Now she just had to clean things up and head for the ending. Right this minute, the device was about to crush Puk Puck. Pfle looked away from it as it creaked toward Puk Puck as if in slow motion. Pfle wasn't averting her eyes because she didn't want to see a sweet-looking girl being cruelly crushed. It was because she didn't want to let Puk Puck into her sight by accident and be charmed.

Shadow Gale was straining harder in an attempt to approach Puk Puck. Pfle circled her arms around her body, firmly restraining her. Shadow Gale still tried to move forward, so Pfle circled ahead of Shadow Gale and embraced her with her whole body. There was a terrible rumbling of the earth behind her. The wind swept up clouds of dust, and the magical girls screamed.

Then she felt a sharp pain in her chest. Liquid dripped to the ground. Pfle looked down at her own chest. There were scissors stuck in it. Shadow Gale twisted them in deeper, and Pfle spat out

the air in her lungs.

Pfle hugged Shadow Gale even tighter. Shadow Gale still tried to push forward, leaning harder into the scissors, but then the pressure suddenly went slack. She wasn't Shadow Gale anymore. Her transformation undone, she was Mamori Totoyama again as she lost consciousness.

Pfle looked ahead. Over Mamori's head, her eyes met with those of the young Lazuline. She was looking at Pfle with a troubled expression. In her hand she clasped a candy that shone rainbow colors. "Oh, sorry. I didn't quite make it in time."

"No…that's just how it goes," Pfle replied. "More importantly, I want to ask something of you."

"What's that?"

Blood leaked from the corner of Pfle's mouth. She forced a smile. "Could you remove any memories of me from her…from Mamori? She isn't very strong, you know."

"You're okay with that?"

"It's fine…and…I want you to…hand this to Deluge… My… Please."

Seeing Lazuline's hand reach toward her, Pfle closed her eyes. It felt like she could sense Mamori's warmth and heartbeat more strongly than when her eyes had been open. She was sure she wasn't imagining it. Dredging up what strength she had in her arms, she embraced Mamori's body tight.

◇ Yoshioka

"What a mess."

She didn't even want to imagine what was going on in the ruins. This wasn't the sort of place a human should just be nonchalantly stepping into. Yoshioka sighed. She looked around, wondering if there might be anything here, but it was all shattered boulders and snapped spears, nothing of interest. Seeing something reflecting the light of the sun, she thought, *Oh* and approached it, bending down. Picking it up from beneath the wreckage, she found it was a candy that shone a rainbow of colors. She looked at it for a few seconds, then eventually tossed it away in disinterest.

Since things had been half cleaned up, she would finish things off, at least. The magical girls who came out from the ruins once

everything was over might be a little bit grateful to the Caspar Faction. Their faction wasn't very big in the first place, and it wasn't as if they furthered research into magic or magical girls, nor were they engaged in any secret machinations or doing any good deeds. From the viewpoint of either moralism or Machiavellianism, they had very literally done nothing. Complacent in their voting position, they just smirked over the fact that they held the deciding vote. No wonder the other factions didn't respect them.

Yoshioka began to collect the trash, leaving aside heavy things like rubble. Circling the outer perimeter, she picked up things one by one, and at some point during her cleanup, she stopped.

"My."

The rubble was swaying a little. She dug in with her nails and kicked the wreckage aside to reveal a magical phone underneath. It wasn't a regular magical phone, but one for management use. When Yoshioka turned it on, a hologram popped up.

"What is going on here, pon?!" the black-and-white cyber fairy raged at her. It yelled and wailed and snapped at Yoshioka, who had nothing to do with anything and whom it had never met before, and it was too much for her to manage. She gave it a mildly confused look, but privately, she was bursting with the urge to grin. Do good things, and good things would come to you, as they said; picking up trash, a task she wasn't normally accustomed to, had brought her a windfall.

"Now, now, please don't be so angry," said Yoshioka. "I'll send you to your owner."

"Please do, pon," replied Fal. "By the way, can I ask you something, pon?"

"What is it?"

"Why are you in human form, pon? Isn't it dangerous for you to not be in magical-girl form, pon?"

"I'm from the Caspar Faction, though. That's just the policy. Well, in all honesty, I do feel it's dangerous, but, like you, I can't oppose the higher-ups…"

"Well, that sounds awful, pon."

"It seems serving the powers is difficult for the both of us, hmm?" Her eyes ran down the display. There was a message. The sender was Marika Fukuroi. So this was what had made the phone vibrate.

"You got it, pon. Snow White always does whatever she wants.

Her vitals…are okay. It seems like she's alive, but honestly, she's always so reckless. She's no good without Fal, pon."

"It's a good thing your master is safe, hmm…? Then I'm turning off the power."

Yoshioka turned off the main power. Now it couldn't be booted up again without the master's authorization. She pulled her own magical phone out of her pocket. She'd received no contact from the Third Lazuline. If Snow White was going to come out of there, it would take a little more time. Yoshioka transformed into a magical girl and peered into her crystal ball.

Would the inside of a smelting furnace be good, or the bottom of the ocean, or the crater of a volcano? She considered a moment, then brought up the image of a wide-shouldered man in his prime cautiously turning the knob on a thick metal door. Frederica shifted her viewpoint. If she moved her sights out the window, there was outer space, nothing but darkness aside from the twinkling of the stars. Getting the hair of a scientist who worked at the International Space Station had been a really good idea. Frederica tossed the management-use magical phone in the opposite direction from the earth. The rest was up to how far momentum would carry it. Watching the magical phone slide along through outer space, she nodded in satisfaction and disengaged the image.

She didn't know how long the Third…or the First would be on her side. Even if they'd been forced to cooperate with her this time around, there would probably not be a next time. Frederica was well hated; she had no shortage of enemies.

It was best to eliminate those who were simply in the way when you could.

EPILOGUE

In a corner of a rather quiet café, two girls were enjoying a secret, whispered conversation.

The two Lazulines, teacher and student, were not picky about where they discussed secrets. Among all abilities magical girls possessed, they valued intuition and sixth sense the most, and the teacher Lazuline had said those were what she'd considered most when selecting her protégée, Lazuline. Their senses and intuition were trained to a level that was supernatural even for someone so extraordinary as a magical girl, allowing them to notice absolutely anyone who might hear, or things like listening devices, keeping their private talk private.

"Heyo, long time no see, master. I guess not since you gave me my memories back in that tent."

"Yes, it's been quite a while, hasn't it? How is Deluge?"

Lazuline paused. She knew her master had noticed her hesitation, but she didn't let that show, instead shrugging in a silly manner. "Seems like she's worrying about lots of stuff."

"She is at that age, after all."

"That's a pretty mean thing to say when you're the one who drove her to it."

The teacher Lazuline put her elbows on the table, laying her chin on the backs of her folded hands. Seeing that casual gesture, the younger Lazuline smiled, saying, "It really has been a long time since we last saw each other, huh."

"There's one issue," said the elder.

"Issue? Was there one?"

"The probability of whether we can control her. We don't want her going wild."

"Ohh, I gotcha. But I kinda want her to give it her best shot."

"Why?"

"…Hmm, I dunno."

She didn't say the reason was "because the Bluebell inside me said so." Lazuline hated being sentimental and gloomy. Her style was more cheerful and fun. But, well, she figured it wasn't wrong to say it was because Bluebell had told her so.

Her master had told her nothing good happens when you act out of sentimentality. Her master was generally not wrong about things, but some people acted on sentimentality anyway. Lazuline had reported that she'd listened to Pfle's request and extracted Shadow Gale's memories, but she hadn't gone so far as to report the chats she'd had with Deluge. Even if they were trivial and unimportant, there were some things she just wanted to keep to herself. There was nothing to be gained from going out of her way to say, *"Having been a princess, now Deluge might become a queen,"* and then get laughed at for it.

Her master's mouth split into a smile. "When you're not even sure of something yourself, it's best to make it clear."

"Is that right?"

"That's right. Because you'll suffer for it."

Her master was generally not wrong about things. Maybe that sort of thing was what had killed Pfle. When she thought back on the magical girl in the wheelchair embracing the other girl, even as she was being stabbed, bitter feelings came back along with the memory. She recalled Pfle's eyes. That was no good. It was difficult to express it properly in words, but still, she also had no desire to try asking her master straight about it.

"Well then, guess I'll follow your example there," said the younger Lazuline. "I'm counting on you to be a model for me, master."

"You're still young, you can be bolder than that."

"If I'm any bolder than that, I'll get cut. Like Frederica."

"Cutting Frederica couldn't be helped. If we worked with her any more than this, it would drag our reputation down, too. It's practically a miracle we cooperated this far. If we hang around her forever, we'll be branded as 'Frederica's ilk.'"

The two magical girls looked at one another, and both smiled at about the same time.

"Is Ripple doing well?" asked the younger Lazuline.

"She's in good health."

She had to mean just physically. The younger Lazuline stuck

out her lower lip, smiling in a very villainous manner.

◇◇◇

Mana had worried and agonized right to the end about what she should have done. In that sense, Mana had been the one most stuck in limbo. She'd yelled about magical girls being stupid or idiots or thoughtless and snapped at Uluru, but it was the thoughtless idiots and the stupid ones who were useful at times like these. It was totally common to worry and agonize and get nothing out of it, but she was still stopping her feet in an attempt to think anyway, which kept her from moving on.

In front of the investigation room, the magical girls who were waiting to be questioned were all in a line. Having suspects make a line to wait was ridiculous, but there were so many of them, and so, due to the irresponsible assessment that *"Well, it's fine to do this with the harmless ones, right?"* such was the outcome they had arrived at. They'd sent the most loyal original members of the former Puk Faction elsewhere, while for the others, those who insisted they'd been under the control of Puk Puck's magic, they had to determine whether that was true.

Apart from these people, card soldiers would also occasionally pass through. They were questioning people under the pretext of cooperating in the investigation. They were much cheerier than the dour former members of the Puk Faction, laughing and chattering among themselves.

Seeing the card soldiers like this, the former Puk Faction members lined up in front of the investigation room booed. Every time they did, Mana yelled, "Shut up!" at them, and though that did basically quiet them down, they all gave Mana miserable and resentful looks. She did admittedly think, *Weren't you guys insisting that you were controlled by the Puk Faction? So then the cards saved you, right?* But it was inevitable that they would feel resentful on seeing the cards acting blatantly at ease in their victory.

Resenting and being resented. It was just like the incident in B City. Pfle, whom Mana had thought she might be able to get something out of, was now gone. If she was going to investigate, it would have to be in another direction. Mana wasn't satisfied. She knew this wasn't something she should be satisfied about, but she

still wanted satisfaction.

If Pfle were gone, then Frederica was her next best bet. Her hunch told her that if she approached Frederica, the truth just might come clear. But maybe this was wishful thinking. And she had to support Snow White and Uluru as much as she could—no, even more than she could.

She could hear crying. Looking over, she saw a heart card was holding her shin and wailing. The other cards were all yelling, "She did it!" as they pointed fingers. The one they pointed at was a former Puk Faction member, looking up at the ceiling with an expression of feigned ignorance as she whistled.

"Hey, you! Don't cause trouble! Quiet down!"

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Fal was still missing. The restoration of the ruins and the repair work on the device were moving along at a rapid clip, and everything that hadn't originally been in the ruins had been gathered up to be returned to its owners or destroyed. Snow White had told the workers to inform her right away if a management-use magical phone was found, but with all that was going on, she'd received no reply. If the phone was in a state such that Fal could contact her, then he would have done so right away, so either the main power was off, or there was some other malfunction. She was worried about Fal, but she believed in him. She knew how capable and tenacious he was, and she also knew how indestructible management-use magical phones were.

Ripple had also not been found. She'd looked to the Inspection Department to help with this as well, and though she hadn't wanted to, she'd had them basically treat Ripple as a suspect or material witness to have them search for her. Mana had said they couldn't just carry out a search without that kind of pretext.

Snow White had heard the voice of Ripple's heart. She knew Ripple was avoiding her, but even knowing that, she wasn't giving up. If Ripple wanted to stay away, then Snow White just had to be the one to go look.

"Should I hold back a little more?" said Snow White.

"Hold back what?"

"I thought if I don't hold back, maybe you couldn't keep up

with me."

"Don't talk like Uluru's legs are slow!" Uluru ran behind her, enraged.

Snow White leaped over a boulder, then bounded off a tree trunk to cross a small valley. While reflecting on the foolishness of having asked Uluru that directly, she dropped her speed subtly, so Uluru wouldn't notice.

The ringtone sounded on the regular magical phone she was borrowing to replace her management-use one. The message was from Mana. She said Dark Cutie had come around to inquire as to her location. Snow White replied to please not tell her.

"What? Who's the message from?" Uluru demanded.

Snow White opened her mouth, closed it, and blew out a breath. "It's nothing serious."

"Ah! There you go, not telling Uluru! You're trying to leave Uluru out, huh?!" Uluru got all huffy again and began complaining about this and that. Maybe Snow White slowing down was what had given her the breath to move her mouth even as she ran. *If she's going to be like this, maybe I shouldn't have slowed down*, Snow White thought regretfully.

Ripple would be after Frederica. Snow White would get to Frederica before Ripple did. And then Snow White would hunt Frederica. She'd never felt proud of the title of Magical-Girl Hunter, but just when it came to Frederica, she felt like she did want to live up to that name.

"Hey, where are we going? You're taking such a weird route." Complaining for a while must have made Uluru feel refreshed, as now she was asking about where they were going. Snow White couldn't tell her, *"This is the sort of thing you should have asked before leaving."*

"There are some people who will help me. I'm going to them to see."

"Can you count on them?" Uluru's words were clear and straightforward. You could tell as much from listening to the voice of her mouth and the voice of her heart together.

Snow White gave a little shake of her head. She doubted her own words were clear and straightforward. But she wasn't about to change herself now. "I'm not going to count on them for everything."

"Of course."

Snow White stopped. Through the trees, she could see a paved road. They'd finally gotten over the mountain. Using the road, they could go faster. "We're going down that road."

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, couldn't we use a gate?"

"I'm taking a break from my work for Inspection. I can't be using the Inspection Department's things."

"What a prim and proper thing to say… Hm?"

"What is it?"

"I feel like I might've just seen a figure in black."

Snow White could hear the thoughts of the figure nearby. She knew who that magical girl hiding in the shadows was, but there was no particular need to touch on that. Snow White didn't think of herself as a heroine, and neither did she think of herself as a villain.

Snow White smiled wryly. That was a very Pfle-like thought.

Rushing down the mountain, she aimed for the road. It seemed Uluru was following, too. The ringtone sounded on her magical phone. She got the feeling the ringtone on the management-use one had been clearer.

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A lost her life protecting B, and then, because of A's death, B wound up like an empty shell. So didn't that mean A's death had been worthless? Every time Deluge saw how despondent Shadow Gale was, Deluge wondered, *Wasn't there a better way to do it?*

Deluge's consciousness had been hazy at the time, but she hadn't let go completely. After Snow White had cut her down, Deluge had been saved by Bluebell, and by Dark Cutie, who'd come back after defeating the Shufflins. She remembered up to being carried out of the ruins. When she had awoken in a bed after somehow surviving it all, she'd been holding on to a map and a key. The map showed the location of a facility that Pfle had managed, and the key fit perfectly into the lock at its entrance. Inside were all sorts of equipment, weapons and armor, drugs, a mountain of documents and papers, and also a girl sitting on a chair. Deluge knew that girl. When she'd kidnapped Shadow Gale, she'd seen her go into human form when she'd passed out. This was Shadow Gale pretransformation. She'd lost the majority of her memories.

Now she wore a hollow expression as she grasped a controller,

playing video games against Armor Arlie. There were Demon Wings flying around the area, but Shadow Gale displayed no particular reaction to them. But even if her mind seemed empty, her fingers moved. Watching her, Deluge couldn't tell if she was enjoying herself or not, but nevertheless, the two girls didn't stop playing the game.

Deluge sat down in a chair and put one elbow on the table, supporting her chin with her wrist. Idly, she watched the pair play games. It had become a familiar sight at the facility.

Arlie, Brenda, and Catherine—they were all taking care of Shadow Gale. Though it wasn't like Brenda and Catherine knew her, they were still treating her well. Deluge's eyes turned to the screens that showed the feeds from the security cameras that filmed outside the facility. Endless rows of empty vacation homes showed on the screens. She'd heard that once the season came, there would be more people around, but knowing only the present, it was hard for Deluge to imagine it.

The things Pfle had given her had laid a gentle pressure on her. Until just recently, Deluge's goal had been to use Shadow Gale to move Pfle at her will. If she used what she'd gotten from Pfle, she'd be able to make way more things, all sorts of people move—to do so much more it was hard for Deluge, a mere artificial magical girl, to imagine.

Accepting the cup Catherine brought her, she raised it to her lips. The coffee Catherine had made was bitter. But she didn't feel like adding sugar or milk in it now. Brenda tossed five sugar cubes in hers. That was another thing Deluge didn't understand. Wasn't that too sweet?

Pfle had been a selfish magical girl up until the bitter end. She would have known Deluge would agonize over this. And knowing that, she casually handed over all this awful stuff. Or no—maybe she'd just seemed nonchalant, but she really hadn't been. Since it had been the bitter end, after all.

Maybe Pfle had had a premonition of her own downfall. Had she been searching for someone to pass these things on to? No matter how Deluge thought about it, she would never know the right answer, but she kept thinking these thoughts over and over anyway.

What could she do? What did she want to do? Not so long ago, she'd had no answers for those questions at all. Even now, it wasn't

like she had any clear answers, but she did have incomparably more options and possibilities. Her feelings were complicated, but that shouldn't at all be a bad thing.

Deluge opened up the notebook she'd been toying with. Inside was a student identification card. The name Nami Aoki was written there, with a photo attached. Deluge closed the page, sandwiching the passbook between her index and middle fingers. She watched as frost crawled across its surface, turning it white, and when she dropped it to her palm and squeezed it tight, it shattered into dust.

Deluge sipped her coffee. It really was hopelessly bitter.

Afterword

My afterwords usually start with a typical greeting like, “It’s been a long time,” but with this book, not much time has passed since the release of the short story anthology *Peaceful Days of 16 Magical Girls*. That aside, it’s been more than a year since *Magical Girl Raising Project: Aces*, the previous installment of the main series, came out, making this the greatest “It’s been a long time” in my personal history. I really am sorry. It’s been a long time. I’m Asari Endou.

I think that by around the time this book goes out, the anime will be reaching its climax, too. With the help of many people, it’s become a wonderful, very well-regarded anime that greatly satisfies the original author as well.

Though my efforts didn’t amount to much, I was allowed to help in various ways, writing shorts and checking the scripts and such. With the scripts, I feel like I was less checking them and more simply enjoying reading them. But I had fun, so it is what it is.

I was also allowed to be present for the voice recording of the first episode of the anime. Oh, it was so impressive! As a writer, I’d hardly imagined voices at all before, but when I actually heard them, I felt like, “This is it! Oh, so this was how it was! So her voice was like this!” You know. When I was at the recording session, I think I went on about how I was very lucky that day or something, but I don’t really remember. I’m sure it’s a good thing that I don’t remember.

After the recording session, I went back to the publisher for a meeting. Marui-no, who’d also been at the session, was beside me drawing pictures of Puk. My managing editor, S-mura, and I were getting worked up, passionately arguing about how *“We should do this”* or *“No, that’s weird,”* and then S-mura turned to the one sitting next to us and said, “Hey, Marui-no, listen, please. Don’t you think Endou’s opinion is weird?” As I was thinking, *It’s not fair to get other*

people on your side like that, hey, you jerk, the meeting ended without a hitch. Wait, there were hitches. Pardon me.

And so, for the first time in a long while, I was blessed with the opportunity to think lots about the characters of the first book. Which reminds me that the other day, it seems Marui-no-sensei and S-mura had a serious discussion about what sort of person Sister Nana is. Sister Nana is a devilish woman who will charm the hearts of people no matter where she appears. Maybe it would have been best to leave her to Winterprison.

Now let's move on to this book.

Lots of things have gotten bad in lots of ways. I've heard there really are people like out of an urban legend out there who will read starting from the afterword, so I wanted to keep the spoilers to a minimum, and now I have a big problem. To you over there reading from the afterword: I have nothing bad to say to you. But just read it from the beginning. I'm sure it'll be more fun that way.

There's the impression that, overall, those characters with lots of worries still have lots of worries, but will they resolve them? Does the author have any intention of resolving them? It's all very interesting, huh? Please wait for the moment.

To all the people of the editorial department who have guided me, and to S-mura: Thank you very much.

Marui-no: Thank you very much for your wonderful illustrations. It's become a bit of a cliché at this point for me to receive your illustrations and shriek about putting Lethe or Puk on the cover after I've already decided who would be on it. I will consider the survival route next time.

To all the readers who have bought this book: Thank you very much, truly. Thanks to all of you, I can live on. Oh, but to you over there who's starting from the afterword—please try properly reading from the beginning, okay?

Thank you
very much!
Marui-no
マルイノ.

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